

# **Remember (It Kills Me To See You Without Me)**

**Kandakicksass**

## **Remember (It Kills Me To See You Without Me) by Kandakicksass**

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**Genre:** Angst, Happy Ending, M/M, Mixture of Movie!Verse and Book!Verse, NO sexual content below the age of 16, Overuse of italics, Post-Derry Forgetting, Richie and Eddie forget each other, Slurs, Spoilers for the book and Chapter Two

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak, Stanley Urish

**Relationships:** Audra Denbrough/Bill Denbrough, Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Beverly Marsh, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

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**Summary:**

Richie Tozier falls in love with Eddie Kaspbrak, forgets him, and finds him again, over the course of twenty-seven years.

## **Remember (It Kills Me To See You Without Me)**

### **Author's Note:**

This fic KICKED MY ASS. It was supposed to be 6k-ish, and now it's 23k. I've procrastinated on multiple essays because of it and literally could not put it down. I've edited it 20 times and am still not totally happy with some parts... but here it is, for your guys' pleasure.

For the sake of universe context, this fic takes place primarily in the movie verse. The kids are 13 at the beginning instead of 10-11 and it starts in 1989. HOWEVER, as Chapter 2 is not out at the time of writing this, the adult portions of this fic will be lifted largely from the book (with possible inspiration from the miniseries). Some important notes on the book-movie event differences to clear up possible confusion:

\*the Ritual of Chüd has been gleefully cut from this universe, like the movie, so the final battle is entirely created (and mildly influenced by the miniseries as well).

\*The clubhouse created in the Barrens by the LC in the book exists but the weird smoke-vision ritual does not. They just hang out there.

\*Beverly's parental situation from the movie stands (her mother is not around, her father is a dick, and her aunt takes her in, so she leaves town as per the movie) but most other parental situations are from the book; most importantly, Richie's mother is a drunk and his father is just kind of a dick and is never home.

\*Because Henry Bowers has a nasty fall in the book and survives that, I'm assuming he survives his movie fall as well. Therefore, he's in Juniper Hills, ready to return and terrorize the LC as adults.

\*That said, Victor and Belch live. In the book they do not, but Patrick can fill their spots when they haunt Henry later, so I'm going to let them live... mostly because Vic looks like Draco Malfoy in the movie and I like him a lot for no conceivable reason. So.

\*Eddie's leper does say the stuff about blowing Eddie, because I felt like the repressed sexuality and fear of diseases is a) still canon in the film and b) even more relevant with the aids crisis, considering that the new timeline is the very end of the 80s.

\*Nobody is allowed to yell at me for shifting the order the LC shows up in for the Chinese restaurant scene. I re-ordered them for dramatic effect, whoops.

Also, I'm hopping on this bandwagon where everyone's teen!Reddie headcanons are Logan Lerman and Ezra Miller as they appeared in Perks of Being A Wallflower. Ezra was already my young adult!Richie headcanon anyway so there ya go. I don't have adult headcanons so imagine who you'd like.

Playlist for this fic (though the songs aren't in any particular order) is: <https://open.spotify.com/user/tisthewoman/playlist/3qFzdQp9zruiMEhMvOUq4T>.

(September 1989)

They're all absolutely disgusting - Eddie especially - when they climb out of the sewers, but they're *alive*, which is more than Richie had thought he'd be able to say after that adventure.

He's exhausted, and Bill is still crying, and Beverly's legs are shaking like they can't quite hold her up. Richie wonders if she's thinking about the deadlights. He would be.

"You think it's really dead?" Stan asks weakly. A strong breeze could blow him away usually, but Richie thinks that at the moment a good breath from any of them could do it.

"M-maybe not - not forever," Bill says, shrugging. He's not as blasé

about it as his tone suggests, judging by the way tears are still streaming down his cheeks, but to his credit, his voice is remarkably steady. “B-b-but f-for now. It’s gone f-for now.”

Richie opens his mouth on a sigh and says the first thing that comes to mind. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer clown.”

There’s a long silence, in which Stan looks almost offended that he’s joking about it, but then to everyone’s surprise there’s a loud bark of laughter from behind Richie. It’s Eddie, who’s genuinely cackling. It’s near hysterical, but Eddie doesn’t really look like he’s cracked; he just looks like he’d been waiting for Richie to say something so he could lighten up himself and was surprised when Richie finally did.

“Trashmouth Tozier!” he gasps, still laughing, and Richie bites his lip to hide his grin.

“If you can’t shittalk the bastard that just tried to eat your friend, who can you shittalk?” he demands, not quite putting on a Voice. Eddie laughs louder. “The man! The monster! The forehead! Pennywise the Bastard Clown!”

Even Beverly and Bill crack smiles. It isn’t Richie’s best work, but the more he speaks the louder Eddie laughs. He’s nearly crying with it.

Richie wishes that he had more to say, more jokes, more anything, but instead they’ve all stopped and are watching Eddie wheeze.

Finally, when he can’t take it anymore, he steps forward and yanks Eddie into a hug. He doesn’t care at all about the gunk, and it’s a good thing, because the second Eddie collides with Richie’s shoulder his wheezing chuckle abruptly turns into a sob and he clings tightly to Richie, his good hand fisted in the back of his shirt. He cries himself hoarse and they all stand there and let him, Richie desperately petting the back of his neck, trying to comfort him.

Eddie is still red eyed when they all part ways, and Richie claps him on the shoulder when he goes. He stays behind for a couple minutes to talk to Bill and Bev, who are making vague plans to meet up in a day or two. Eventually, even they all split up to go home. Even though they’d separated, Richie gets home a half hour later and Eddie

is sitting on his porch. He's quiet and filthy.

"I couldn't go home like this," he explains, like it needs an explanation. "Mom would have a cow."

Richie doesn't care about his excuse at all. "Come in and get cleaned up," he says instead. "You smell like the clown literally shat on you."

After Eddie's shower, when he silently slips into Richie's room in a pair of Richie's sweats and a tshirt, Richie just gestures towards the phone. Eddie calls his mom, tells her over her stuttering protests that he's staying the night with Richie, and hangs up before crawling into Richie's bed and falling asleep damn near instantly.

Richie doesn't sleep. He keeps watch.

(August 1990)

By the time they're starting high school, Beverly and Bill are both gone. Richie has a hard time remembering how right it felt with all seven of them together. There was something guiding them that summer, and now he feels more like a normal kid. Scratch that. He feels less like a Loser and more like a loser.

But Eddie is still around; his mom kicked up a fuss about leaving Derry and he had shown her defiance like he never had before. Eddie hadn't ever been one for tantrums with his mother but he'd put his foot down the second she'd started twittering about packing their things.

Richie doesn't know what he'd do without Eddie - without Mike and Stan and Ben, too, but Eddie most of all.

Everyone's noticed that they're inseparable, even more than the Losers' Club had been last summer. They get teased viciously by their classmates, but Henry Bowers' gang is all broken up and Bowers himself was thrown into Juniper Hills the second he was discovered washed up and babbling nonsense in the river, so no one gives them too much trouble. The worst offender besides Bowers had been Hockstetter, and he's dead.

Belch and Criss will glare at them sometimes, all of them. Richie's been spat on more times than he can count. Still, it's a better life. They ignore the teasing, because they're best friends and the jokes about them being *too close* make Richie a little squirmy for reasons he can't put his finger on. He and Eddie get the brunt of it, and that just doesn't make sense. After all, best friends or not, Eddie spends half his time yelling at Richie and Richie gives him more shit than all the others put together.

They're in detention together one day, which surprises absolutely no one except for Mrs. Kaspbrak, who chooses to live in denial about the fact that while Eddie is a good boy, he is also a little hellraiser when the situation calls for it.

"Everything is your fault," Eddie grumbles as he flips through a Plastic Man comic. It's at least two years old but Eddie could read them a million times and not get bored.

The teacher at the front of the room overseeing their detention is fast asleep when Richie eyes him to see if they'll get in trouble for talking.

"When isn't it, sweet cheeks," Richie responds lazily when he's determined they're in the clear. Eddie glares at him out of the corner of his eye, but Richie cares very, very little about his half-hearted show of aggression. Besides, usually it's all five of them in detention because of Richie. One glare is nothing compared to four. "Come on, Eds. You can't deny it was fun."

Eddie sighs. "It was up until the principal walked in on our trash fire and nearly expelled us," he says crossly. "We'll be in detention for *weeks*."

"But the bathroom smells better," Richie points out. He begins to doodle the principal's angry expression in the notebook he has out on his desk.

"Burnt trash does not smell better than normal trash," Eddie argues with a grimace.

"I would think you'd appreciate burning all those germs."

"That *was* particularly satisfying. Until I realized that we were then breathing in trash particles."

"Can't win for losing," Richie sighs dramatically. "Try to do a nice thing for ya, Eds, and you ruin my efforts."

Eddie rolls his eyes. *Hard*. "You did it to entertain yourself, you fucknut. And don't fucking call me that. I hate it when you call me that."

"Right-O, Eddie Spaghetti."

"*That's worse*," he groans. Richie can't help but laugh, delighted at his ire. "Beep beep, Richie."

"Beep beep," he agrees solemnly, and shoves his glasses back up his nose. The rest of the detention passes in companionable silence.

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They're out in the Barrens one day, lazing around with nothing to do. It's the five of them that are left in town - him and Eddie, Mike, Stan, and Ben. It would be more fun if they weren't trying to get in one last hangout before Stan leaves town that night, but Richie's trying not to think about it.

Slowly, they're all leaving. Bev was first, and they tried to be happy for her because it was getting her out of her shitty dad's house, but then Bill left right after her like he couldn't bear to stay in town without her. Richie knows that's unfair, because if it was about Bev, Ben would have left town, too. It's not like they can choose if their parents decide to leave, after all. They're kids. They have to go where they're told. Still, they were supposed to be the lucky seven, and they're not feeling lucky anymore. The Losers' Club is dying, or maybe going into hibernation. It's a depressing thought.

None of them have the energy to be running around, and they're all hanging out by the clubhouse they dug out the summer before. It's still sturdy thanks to Ben's genius, but they don't go in; they just sit down outside in the grass.

"What do you think your new school'll be like?" Eddie asks Stan.



Maybe it's just to break the silence.

Stan hums. "Dunno. It's got a bigger Jewish community than Derry, though, so hopefully I won't automatically be a loser just for that." He picks some grass and throws it at Richie. "You guys are great, *sometimes*, but I'm sick of having to hide from assholes like the Bowers gang every day just so I can leave school without getting beaten up, you know?"

"You're not the one whose bag gets shat in like some weird summer break ritual," Richie snorts. "They didn't fuck with you nearly as much as they do us."

"They've started putting notes that say *faggot* in my locker," Eddie adds. "I found ten the other day. In the span of one day!" He makes a face at the ground and Ben reaches out to pat him on the shoulder. He's been quiet lately, but Richie's pretty sure that's because he misses Beverly. Anyway, Eddie's not even lying - Richie saw them. They've all been called *flamer* and *fag* for years, because the dickheads at their school don't have any more creative insults, but it's been worse lately. "It probably doesn't help that I'm so much damn shorter than everyone else. How likely is it that I've still got a growth spurt coming?" He sounds like he's joking, but he really does look upset about it. His eyes are dark and anxious.

"Considering that you're not even fifteen yet?" Mike snickers, not even noticing how seriously Eddie's taking it. "Pretty good. Hold out hope, Eddie. Besides, it's not like you're *that* short."

Eddie's deadpan expression makes Richie laugh. "He comes up to my *shoulder*, Mike. Don't lie to him."

Even Ben chuckles at that.

"I'm gonna miss you guys," Stan says quietly when the conversation dies down. He's sitting with his knees pulled up to his chest, and Richie has this pang in his gut, like he needs to beg Stan not to leave. He wants to, but doesn't.

"You can visit," Ben points out. "And call us, obviously."

"If I don't get three letters from you a week, Stan-the-Man, I'm going to drive to your new house myself to punch your lights out," Richie tells him solemnly, and Stan grins at him instead of rolls his eyes at the theatrics.

"Don't forget about us, okay?" Eddie says, and it's more vulnerable than he usually lets himself be. "Because Bill is already starting to write less, and I haven't heard from Beverly in weeks, and that's *not* cool. So you can't decide we're not worth the time for a letter, okay?"

Stan stops grinning. Richie's not grinning, either, and he scoots a little closer to Eddie. He doesn't hug him or anything, because he's a man and not a thirteen year old girl, but he does knock shoulders with Eddie in a silent *I'm here*.

"I'll never forget you guys," Stan agrees softly. "And I'll call and visit, okay?" He flexes the hand that has his scar from their blood oath, and Richie knows he's thinking about a possible reason for a visit right then. Richie hopes it never comes to that.

That night, they see the Uris family off. Stan's parents are standoffish but friendly enough, and they let the boys take turns hugging Stan tight. In spite of their often combative relationship, Richie hugs him twice.

Then he's gone.

(May 1991)

Ben leaves the second their freshman year of high school ends. It's not his fault, because his mom decides it's better for them to get a fresh start somewhere, even though everything's settled down, but it still blows.

"Do you think we'll all leave?" Eddie asks him with a frown a couple weeks afterwards. His eyes are downcast, his thick brows furrowed. "Just... one by one, until we all leave Derry behind?"

Mike is doodling in a notebook while they all lounge in Richie's front yard. He glances up and looks pretty solemn himself. "I don't know.

It's kind of looking like it."

"Wouldn't say leaving Derry isn't a *bad* thing," Richie snorts, but Eddie glares at him the second the words leave his mouth. "Not that I'm saying we should all leave each other behind. You're my best friends, you know I don't mean that," he hastens to add. "But Derry's kind of a shithole. And with everything that happened the summer before freshman year..."

Eddie doesn't look like he feels any better about Richie's amendment. "I don't like Derry any more than you do, but I'd rather be here with you guys than somewhere else alone." He glares ahead, not looking at him or Mike.

"Yeah," is all Richie can think of to say. "Don't worry about it, Eds. Whose mom would I fuck if you left?"

"Don't call me that, you asshole, and that's *gross*," Mike laughs at the face Eddie pulls. "Mike, you're my favorite. You have never once talked about my mom, or implied that she has crabs, and I appreciate that."

"I was just *warning* you -"

"Yeah, that you're an *asshole* -"

"Guys!" Mike interrupts, laughing. "You two are awful. Oh my god."

Eddie scratches at his scalp sheepishly, but Richie just grins. After a second, Eddie grins back.

(June 1991)

When summer properly rolls around, Richie comes to a realization, thanks in part to the heat and their tendency to swim most days. Swimming, which means walking around half naked.

Eddie has *lengthened*. It's the only word Richie can think of to describe it. His limbs, which have always been long, now seem to go on for miles. His stomach, which had been pudgy with childhood, is

now just the slightest bit soft and his torso seems longer because of it. He's got a long neck and delicate looking eyelids with long eyelashes.

Richie remembers once staring at Beverly the way he stares at Eddie. One day at the Quarry, she'd been laid out in only her underwear and he'd just looked at her (they all had, but she was a *girl*), but he hadn't had this feeling in his chest then like he was about to combust. God, right now he's so overwhelmed with it. He doesn't know how to put the feeling into words to try and make sense of them, even just for himself.

Eddie is napping on a towel, much like Beverly had been that day, and for once it's only the two of them so there's no one to call Richie out for staring. Mike is working, and everyone else is gone. It's just them. Eddie, Richie, and the freckles on Eddie's nose that he can't look away from no matter how hard he tries.

Richie doesn't understand this *burning* need to touch Eddie. His hands are trembling slightly on his knees, and his mouth is dry. He knows what this makes him, the wanting. He knows and he would be scared of it except that he can't stop thinking about Eddie long enough to really think about it and he can't look away to get his head on straight.

He burns, and burns, and burns.

(August 1991)

They're having a sleepover with Mike, weeks after the day at the Quarry, but Mike is asleep and Richie and Eddie are finishing up Ghostbusters for the third time that week. Eddie is sat on the couch next to Richie, blinking at the movie with tired eyes because it's so, so late.

It's late, and Richie can't focus on the movie because Eddie is next to him. It's a new sense of awareness that keeps him in tune with wherever Eddie is. They gravitate toward each other, like always, but now Richie doesn't know if that's good or bad because now he wants to gravitate closer.

Richie is emphatically distracting himself by wondering if It could have taken the form of the Pillsbury Dough Boy, when Eddie gives a little sigh and slumps over, resting his head against Richie's shoulder. He goes stock still, but Eddie doesn't move.

Parts of Richie - very loud parts - are screaming that this isn't how boys act. There's nothing wrong with being close to your friends but this feels like something you do with girls. Maybe he only thinks that because he wants to be close to Eddie the way he does with girls. That's probably what it is, because Eddie *always* gets like this when he's sleepy. They used to have cuddly movie-watching parties all the time as kids because it was comfortable and warm. He tells himself it's not weird - it's not weird, and it doesn't make him creepy to let Eddie lean into him even though he feels the way he does.

He takes a deep breath, because he talks like a coward sometimes but he's *brave*, and then he shifts a little so that his left arm is extended over the back of the couch and Eddie's shoulders. Seemingly unaware of the context, Eddie just shifts so he's more comfortable against Richie's side. He prays Eddie doesn't look up to examine how red his face is.

He doesn't. He does, however, fall asleep fifteen minutes later, and when he does he presses his face into Richie's chest and slings an arm over Richie's stomach.

He holds his breath as long as he can. When he lets it out, he takes another one in and dares to press his nose into the crown of Eddie's head. He falls asleep like that.

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Richie... isn't good at keeping things to himself. It's barely a week later when they're sitting in the old clubhouse-hole in the Barrens just for lack of something to do, alone again, because Mike got a real job at the library on top of working at the farm. They're alone together a lot these days and it's hell on Richie's nerves.

So, instead of stewing on it by himself and reminding himself over and over again that acting on this shit is what's gonna make him all those cruel names carved into the Kissing Bridge, he panics when

Eddie asks him what the hell's been wrong with him lately and kisses the poor boy.

It's not much of a kiss, because Eddie is stock still and is hardly seeming to even breathe, but Richie can feel a flush lighting his face bright pink, and his hands on Eddie's shoulders are trembling so hard Eddie has to feel it. Eddie's mouth is *soft* and Richie feels like he's gonna jump out of his skin if Eddie so much as twitches because he's so nervous.

In the end, Eddie doesn't twitch, but Richie leaps back as much as their clubhouse allows and laughs half-hysterically. "Well, that was a fun adventure!" he squeaks. His voice sounds very high pitched, even to him. "Definitely more impressed by your mom, sorry Eds - that is, I fucked your mom, and she was... better?"

Every word that comes out of Richie's mouth, the more scrambled and ridiculous they are, don't even seem to affect Eddie at all. He's just sitting there, staring open-mouthed at Richie with those huge doe-brown eyes.

"I've gotta - I've gotta go! I can hear -" For a moment, he wants to childishly say his mom is calling for him, anything to get him out of this situation that *he's* created, *with his mouth*, but he knows that's ridiculous because they're in the Barrens. Alone. "*Your mom is calling me for round two,*" he word-vomits instead, desperate, and then he trips his way out of the clubhouse like Pennywise. Itself is on his heels.

Eddie does not come after him, and Richie berates himself for ruining everything the entire bike ride home.

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Not two hours later there's a knock on the door. Richie's dad is out and his mom is drunk and he doesn't want to answer it but it could be important, so he does. The idea that it could be Eddie doesn't even occur to him, because he figures Eddie will never want to talk to him ever again.

This is probably why he's so shocked when he opens the door and

Eddie rains hellfire on him.

“*WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?*” is practically screamed in his face. Richie flushes and steps out onto the porch, shutting the door behind him lest his mother hear Eddie yelling and wake up to find out what happened.

He opens his mouth to defend himself (or just to say something, anything), but Eddie cuts him off. “You kissed me and then you *talked about fucking my mom*,” Eddie hisses, jabbing a finger into his chest. It kind of hurts. “What the actual *fuck*, Tozier? Are you on *drugs*?”

Richie wishes he was at that moment, so that the whole interaction could be written off as a trip. “I just... it was a joke?”

Eddie’s glare could melt the flesh off his face. “Kissing me or talking about my mom?”

Richie hates everything. “Don’t... look, it was just... you make it sound so *gay*,” he says, like he doesn’t know perfectly well kissing Eddie *was* gay and not at all a joke. “I just meant... it was a joke?” Saying it again doesn’t help matters, but he doesn’t know what to say that isn’t *I really really wanted to*.

Eddie shrieks at him wordlessly, truly furious, and Richie is waiting for him to decide he never wants to see Richie again.

Instead, Eddie kisses *him*.

It’s an angry kiss, all teeth and unpracticed force, but Richie can’t help but melt gracelessly into it, eyes shutting without him willing them to do so. Eddie has his hands clenched over Richie’s upper arms, but Richie doesn’t mind; he fumbles for Eddie’s waist and holds on. Neither of them know what they’re doing, and god knows they shouldn’t be doing it on the front porch where anyone could see, but Richie can’t pull away and he lets Eddie manhandle him against the wall of his house. One hand slips from Richie’s sleeve and comes up to cup the junction of his neck and cheek as Eddie bites at his lower lip.

When Eddie finally pulls away, he doesn’t go far. They breathe into

each other's mouths, still shiny with spit. "Now what was it you were bullshitting about jokes and sounding gay?" Eddie asks him breathlessly. Richie feels like his brain has short-circuited.

"I'm queer for you," he says without thinking, and he's not ashamed of it like he had been before. He wants to make a crack about Eddie's lips making him feel like a new woman, but he'd rather Eddie kiss him again and that sure as shit won't happen if he opens his mouth for a stupid comment.

"Yeah," Eddie says patiently. "No *shit*, Sherlock."

He can't control it - he giggles helplessly, and after a moment of trying to continue looking stern Eddie laughs too. It's his favorite sound in the world.

They go inside and quietly lock themselves in Richie's room.

"I'm not mad at you for running away," Eddie clarifies once they're settled. They're cross legged on Richie's bed and Richie is nervously nibbling on his lower lip. "I'm mad because you bullshitted about my mom after you kissed me out of literal nowhere and *then* ran away."

"Can't stop the Trashmouth," he says weakly, but Eddie just raises his eyebrows, unimpressed. After a long moment of silence, he breaks. "I realized a month or two ago that I... liked you. And I've never thought those things about boys before and I know I'm not supposed to, but I couldn't help it! And I kissed you without really thinking about it and panicked and I was scared you'd hate me and..." He sighs heavily. "I still like girls, I think. But I like you, too. I like you the most." He waits for Eddie to laugh at him.

Eddie isn't laughing. He looks impossibly sad - and knowing, and conflicted, and Richie might even love him, just for that look on his face.

"I think I'm just gay," he tells Richie quietly. "I think I just... like boys. And I never said anything because I was scared *you* would hate *me*, like all the kids at school. No one wants to be friends with a gay



kid, right? But then you kissed me, and I never expected it, but I've *thought* about it. Kissing you. Before. But I never let myself really think about it much because of the obvious." He bites at his lower lip and won't look Richie in the eye.

"I'm not as good at keeping secrets as you are. I couldn't keep it to myself," Richie confesses. "And of course I don't hate you. Always knew you were a pansy boy anyway." He grins, hoping to lighten the mood.

Eddie glares at him.

"What? It's okay to say that if I'm queer too, right?"

Eddie's glare softens into something that's merely despairing. "I have no idea why I like you so much."

In spite of himself, Richie feels his cheeks warm. Something in his chest warms too. "Lucky for you I'm apparently soft for pretty pansy boys."

"Stop *calling* me that," Eddie groans, but he's flushing, too.

Unable to help himself, hoping that the conversation means he's allowed to do it, Richie leans forward and cups Eddie's face with his hands. He waits until Eddie has stopped groaning and is just sitting there, looking at him with those huge eyes, and then he kisses Eddie softly. Eddie raises his hands to wrap loosely around Richie's wrists, but he doesn't pull him away. He kisses back, and Richie loses himself in Eddie's mouth.

"What can I call you?" Richie asks after he manages to pull away again. "Because it sounds awfully queer to say boyfriend -"

"I love how you're assuming I'd actually date you!" Eddie snaps, half-affronted, but Richie can only grin at him. "And how you're ignoring the fact that *we are being awfully queer* -" Which basically confirms what Richie was getting at, so he just kisses Eddie quiet again and shivers a happy shiver at the knowledge that he *is* allowed to do that, at least when it's just them two.

"Boyfriend it is," he whispers afterwards, and Eddie's cheeks stay red

but he doesn't pull away.

(August 1991)

They're inseparable, and they still get teased for it, but now they both *get* it. It doesn't mean it sucks less when people make faces at them as they walk shoulder to shoulder down the hall, but now it's expected and balanced by the pure joy Richie feels when Eddie is nearby and *his*.

One thing that does change is that now, whenever Mike isn't there with them, they're forever finding corners to hide and kiss in. They're acting like every stupid couple in the damn high school, necking in dark corners, but it doesn't mean Richie can keep his hands off of him and it definitely doesn't mean Eddie can resist his charms, of which Richie has *plenty*.

That's exactly what they're doing when Mike catches them one day, when they were supposed to all be meeting to swim by the quarry. He's an hour late and they thought he'd gotten busy - it isn't like they've been at home to answer any phone call he might have made.

"What the - guys?"

Mike sounds astounded, like this is a possibility he hadn't even considered. It's not like they're indecent - they aren't even that close together; they were just leaning over with their hands tangled between them so they could kiss comfortably. They haven't quite gotten over the novelty of having someone to kiss, but they also haven't gone past a little bit of tongue. Richie can't believe *he* of all people is taking it slow (after all, he's been pretending he's not a virgin since he was ten), but if he's being honest it isn't just Eddie who's nervous about getting too intimate in a world where being intimate with boys is one of the worst things a man can do. They both have some issues to get over, but it doesn't stop them from kissing softly for ages until their mouths are red and tender.

They both yank back, but Eddie manages to throw himself backwards with enough force to fall over the back of the rock he was sitting on

and land on the ground in a stunned heap.

Mike blinks at him. "I don't know what's going on here. Someone explain to me what's going on here."

Richie thinks long and hard about how to respond. "I... got bored with his mother?"

Eddie groans. It's possibly the loudest and most exasperated sound Eddie has ever made because of him.

Mike continues to blink. "Eddie is significantly cuter than his mother, I guess?"

Richie beams like this is an acceptable answer. Out of all the possible answers, really, it isn't that bad, he thinks. Not a ringing endorsement, but still pretty good on the grand scale. "That's what I was thinking."

Mike finally processes enough to stop looking like an alarmed still photo. He settles into something that looks to Richie like bemusement. "So, is this an experimentation thing? I thought we passed the kissing practice phase of life back in fifth grade."

"I don't need kissing practice!" Richie protests, and Eddie finally gets up and plants himself back on the rock, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed. He's also not running away, so between him and Richie his track record is still the best. "I'm a great kisser! Ask anybody!" An elbow from Eddie makes him rethink that statement. "Or, not everybody. Just Eddie. Ask Eddie!" The elbow returns and Richie winces. That wasn't better, and he realizes that now.

Mike's bemusement turns into something close to amusement. "Eddie's got a lot of knowledge on that topic, huh?"

Eddie very carefully buries his face in his hands and tries not to exist. Richie rubs his shoulder comfortingly and only realizes after Mike raises his eyebrows even higher that he probably isn't helping matters.

"I'm not going to bite if you give me a straight answer," Mike says after several moments. His tone softens. "What's going on?"

It's Eddie who speaks up, though his words are muffled by his hands. It's still audible. "We're gay."

"I can see that," Mike snorts. Eddie makes a sound like a dying cat and looks up in surprise at the dry tone. To be fair, it's not often that you meet someone who doesn't give two shits that his two friends are both *like that*. "That's not what I meant. I meant between you two. If you're not just... practicing... then what are you doing?"

Richie looks up at him, trying to appear as innocent as possible. "Making out?" He gets two unimpressed looks for that, and sighs. "Michael, my good man. Sometimes, when a boy likes another boy *very much*, and the other boy also likes him *very much*, they partake in recreational mouth-to-mouth. Regularly. With feelings, also, and sometimes hand holding."

"Is it that hard to say you're dating?" Mike asks, seemingly rhetorical. "I just wanted to know if you were actually together."

"Yes, it is hard to say," Eddie answers miserably. Richie has to agree with his assessment of the situation. It *is* hard, although Richie still gets happy butterflies whenever he calls Eddie his boyfriend, even to himself. It's a consequence of being the way they are, Richie thinks. He's not even bitter about it, though he will be some years in the future.

Mike's exasperated expression turns a little sad. "Well, I'm fine with it. So. Carry on? Or not - not in front of me, please. But my point stands."

"You're a tip-top lad, Michael," Richie says, in his worst British Voice. And then, in his regular voice, he adds, "And for the record I like girls too. I'm both. If there's a word for that, that's what I am."

"That's fine too," Mike tells him patiently. Richie thinks they're pretty lucky to have a friend like Mike. "Can we swim now, though?"

They do.

(September 1991)

"You are the stupidest motherfucker I've ever met," Eddie is saying one day. He's not actually paying Richie any attention; he's absorbed by a Plastic Man comic.

"I love you, too, baby," Richie responds, half-sarcastic, just as lazy. He's not actually reading - there's a Superman comic covering his face but it's just resting there on its own. Richie might as well be sleeping.

"I don't get you guys," Mike says. They're all chilling in Eddie's room, taking advantage of Mrs. Kaspbrak being out of the house. "Anyone would be forgiven for thinking you hate each other."

"We've always been like this," Eddie points out mildly. "It's mainly Richie's fault. I've been trying to house train him to no avail."

"Beep beep," Richie agrees.

Mike doesn't look any less confused. "Yeah, but before you were just friends. Now you're dating - aren't you supposed to be nice to each other?"

Eddie snorts. "You know we're still best friends, right? We just also make out sometimes."

"All the time," Richie corrects. "Because I am a great kisser. Eddie and his *mom* can both -"

"Shut up, Trashmouth," Eddie interrupts. He doesn't look particularly pissed off, probably because he got used to the jokes about his mother back in fourth grade.

"Aye aye, guvnah!"

"Can you be friends and boyfriends?" Mike asks, genuinely confused. "I thought your relationship... changes, when you date, right?"

Richie is the one to squint at him. "What kind of relationships do you straight people have if you're not friends with the person you're dating? Why would you want to date someone you can't chill with?"

Eddie nods along. "Rah rah, my good man," he agrees. "I concur; you

straight people are weird.” He giggles a little when he says it, because there’s a little bit of a novelty to being *out* to someone who isn’t Richie. It’s fun to mention, and even more fun to realize that Mike doesn’t think any less of him when he does. It makes him feel normal - less like a pariah, and more like he’s just different in a way that’s not bad. Just different, like Stan being Jewish. Richie grins at him, knowing exactly what he’s thinking.

The Richie-Eddie dynamic doesn’t make any more sense to Mike, but there has always been an affectionate thread underneath the teasing - something protective and adoring. During That Summer, it was something he’d noticed - even then, if they were in danger Richie and Eddie always reached for each other. Now that he has the context, Mike can easily relate it to the way Ben and Bill reached for Beverly. Richie would panic when Eddie was hurt, and he would get angry on his behalf even as he called the poor boy all sorts of names.

Yeah, Mike thinks, this was a long time in coming.

(June 1992)

Richie almost-ruins everything shortly after Eddie’s sixteenth birthday. They’re entering manhood now, even though Eddie’s mom is vehemently ignoring that fact, and Richie and Eddie have been dating for almost a year. That’s forever when you’re in high school, but something in Richie says the time doesn’t even matter because they’re going to be together forever-forever anyway.

He doesn’t think it’s unusual, when he finally makes an attempt to move beyond making out, beyond getting horny while they kiss and not saying or doing anything about it. They’ve been together for ages, and most of the boys he knows who date get to at least third base by the third month they’re together, even if it’s a *nice girl* he’s with. Neither he nor Eddie are nice girls by any means, and so Richie doesn’t foresee Eddie’s reaction when he hesitantly reaches down to touch where Eddie’s hard in his jeans.

“Do you wanna -” he starts to ask, but Eddie yanks away from him so fast he can feel the wind against his face. He blinks at Eddie in

confusion, and then in a horror that approaches shame when he sees the look on Eddie's face. It's not a happy look. As a matter of fact, it's the kind of face Eddie would have made while facing down Pennywise.

"Don't you fucking touch me," he says, and there's real panic in his voice. Even though Richie doesn't understand why he also doesn't argue or try to go against his wishes. If touching him causes Eddie to look at him like he was the leper itself, he'll never touch Eddie again. The idea that Eddie could ever look at him like that makes him feel sick.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. Eddie just sits there and shakes, knees pulled up to his chest. He keeps his eyes on Richie like he's scared he'll lunge at him without warning. "I'm... I'm gonna go. Okay?"

Eddie doesn't say anything, and Richie struggles not to cry until he's outside and walking home in the dark.

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He doesn't see Eddie for a week. When he does come back around, as if he realizes that Richie isn't going to come to him until he knows that Eddie wants him to, he approaches on a Sunday after church. Richie is in the clubhouse, which is crumbling now but still more or less stable, because if he can't be with Eddie he's got nowhere else to go to get away from his parents while Mike is working.

Eddie is quiet and solemn and when he crawls inside, he sits a foot away. Richie doesn't try to bridge the gap. It probably says something about him that every time they're in this position he automatically assumes Eddie is going to end things, to realize that Richie isn't any good for him, but it doesn't stop him from trying to prepare himself for the inevitable.

"I never told anyone this before," Eddie begins quietly. He sounds so nervous and uncomfortable that Richie wants to make a joke to lighten the mood, but contrary to popular belief Richie *can* realize that this isn't the time. "But. I don't want you to think it's because of you, okay? I don't want you to think it's your fault. This is on me, and maybe my mom, too."

"I'm not gonna make fun of you," he promises, and he means it. "You can tell me." Eddie's return smile is brittle.

"The leper," he says, and Richie freezes. His mind goes as a million miles an hour about where this could be going. He *hadn't* imagined the connection between Eddie's face when he'd pulled away, then. It was the same face. His stomach rolls at the realization that he'd been *the leper* to Eddie, even if just for a moment. Eddie continues, unaware of Richie's growing nausea. "It... it did things that kind of fucked me up."

A different kind of fear catches him off guard. "Did it touch you?" Richie demands, his mouth dry. There's a sort of panicky fury in his throat.

"No," Eddie rushes to assure him. "No, it never touched me, not more than grabbing at my shirt or shoulder to hold me in place. But it used to talk about things. My mom is really crazy about the gay thing - back then she was always talking about AIDS, and how gay people were dirty, and it really stuck with me. Maybe that was because I knew, even then, that I was like this, but it got roped in with the fear of being sick, because Mom made it sound like being gay and doing gay things was sick." He swallows and Richie feels his heart in his throat. He knows those things, of course, and his parents aren't much better, but he also knows how much deeper that connotation of *sickness* goes for Eddie.

"What did it say?" he asks.

Eddie winces. He's wringing his hands in his lap. "It used to say it would give me a blowjob," he says. It's barely a whisper. "For a dollar. For ten cents. For free. It would chase me and say it would give me a blowjob, like sometimes the hobos used to when they were really desperate for money. And when you tried to touch me, it wasn't you touching me that freaked me out - it was that voice in my head. It was the thinking that I was sick for wanting it, and would get sick if I did it."

Richie doesn't know what to say. "You know you can't get AIDS from me, right? I don't have AIDS. So you can't get it. You don't just get AIDS from doing gay stuff."



"I *know* that," Eddie stresses, frustrated. "But it doesn't mean I can just stop thinking that there's something generally wrong with me for doing that stuff in the first place. It feels so right to be with you, Richie, please believe me. It sounds so cheesy, but it's the truth. So up until now I've never really thought too hard about the physical stuff - the *gay* stuff - because being with you was easy as pie. I didn't even realize I would react like that until you tried to..." He cuts himself off and bites his lower lip.

And yeah, Richie gets that. He has a hard time with stuff like that, too, sometimes. He wants Eddie enough to ignore it, and God knows he's not exactly a rule-follower in the first place, but sometimes he does have that feeling underneath his skin like there's something wrong with him. The day he'd reached for Eddie's belt and been pushed away, he'd gone to bed that night feeling sick to his stomach because he'd wanted it so badly and that clearly meant he was bad, too. It had scared Eddie, and that meant that it was bad, and so was he.

"We don't have to do anything, then," Richie says without thinking, and part of him can't believe he's a sixteen year old boy completely dismissing sex, but most of him just feels horror at the idea of pushing Eddie when he's not ready.

"I want to," Eddie says, as if he can hear Richie's thoughts. "I just need some time. Is that okay? To ease into things?"

Richie takes Eddie's hand in his, and when he does Eddie's cheeks light up but so do his eyes. Encouraged, he takes that hand up to his mouth and kisses Eddie's knuckles gently. Eddie rolls his eyes, but he blushes brighter. "We can wait however long you need," Richie tells him, genuine and heartfelt. "And if you're never comfortable we don't have to do anything ever." He'd make any number of concessions to make sure Eddie is happy with him and stays that way.

"You've been obsessed with sex since you were twelve," Eddie points out dryly.

"I've been obsessed with you since I was younger than that," Richie retorts. It's an exaggeration, but not by much. "I care about you,

dude. I would rather jerk it alone for the rest of my life than do anything to hurt you.”

“You punched me last week,” he objects, and Richie groans.

“You’re being obtuse,” he grumbles. Eddie cracks a smile. “You know what I’m saying, and I mean it, okay? You’re not going to lose me over this, and I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I believe you.”

(August 1992)

Richie had never thought he’d be a doting boyfriend, but the longer they’re together the more they settle into the kind of sugary relationship Richie thought was reserved for cookie-cutter straight people. He still makes jokes, and he still gets Eddie hopping mad sometimes, but he also sneaks into Eddie’s room at night when he calls about having nightmares. He buys him things, whatever he can afford, and when they’re alone Richie likes nothing more than to just lie around with Eddie laying with his head on Richie’s chest. Taking naps with Eddie is his favorite activity, actually. All the hellraising in the world can’t compare.

“Do you ever think about the future?” he asks one night, when they’re doing just that. His nose is pressed into Eddie’s hair, clean from a recent shower. “About us, together?”

Eddie shrugs against his body. “Sometimes. I don’t think about it much. Do you?”

“Not much,” Richie murmurs. “But... that’s mostly because I just think that we’ll be together. No need to think about specifics when I know the important things, right?”

Eddie pulls back with a bemused sort of smile. “Sometimes you surprise me,” he says, and then he leans in and he kisses Richie so softly he can’t help but get the point. He thinks sometimes that it’s odd that he feels this all-encompassing devotion, but then Eddie will kiss him like this and he’ll know that it’s mutual. It’s okay. Like the

Losers' Club coming together, it's inevitable and *right*.

(November 1992)

It's because of that devotion that they come out at school. It's not something they really planned, but one day the gang that replaced Bowers and his friends - not half as menacing but just as antagonistic - is giving them shit and Richie breaks. They've talked about it before, so it's not like he's ruining Eddie's life by outing them, but he still doesn't mean to yell "*At least my boyfriend is cuter than all your girlfriends*" like he has a deathwish. Even Eddie's panicked wheezing doesn't make him shut up, even though it really should.

They break his glasses. He's not surprised, and neither is Eddie, who nurses his broken nose later with a dark look on his face. Eddie got away with only a scraped elbow from getting shoved to the ground and a couple puffs from his inhaler, but Richie's face is bruising pretty spectacularly and his stomach hurts from getting kicked. Bowers gang or not, queer is queer, and queer doesn't go over well in a town like Derry.

"Don't you ever do that again," Eddie says firmly when they're alone in Eddie's room and patching Richie up. "If you're gonna get yourself beaten up like this, *don't*."

"I can't stop other people from being homophobic dickbags," Richie grumbles. "But I'm not going to hide *us* like we're some dirty secret. I fucking love you. I fucking love you and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, and they can call me a dirty fag all they like; it's not going to change it."

Eddie is tearing up a little, and he kisses Richie hard. They fall together, and this time when Richie touches him, Eddie doesn't flinch away, because he pulls Richie's hand to him in the first place. The only thing they're careful about is kissing around Richie's broken nose.

(October 1993)

By their senior year of high school, Richie is not just out - he's out and proud. He's learned the word for what he is, and he's made it a point to be as openly bi as possible. He avoids the grown men in town, and he avoids his father even more, but he doesn't talk about it at home and his parents are leaving him alone about it even though Richie knows they hate him. He's getting strong in the shoulders and arms, his legs lean with muscle as well, and he knows that he can take care of himself if he's careful enough. At school, none of the kids scare him, so he can act as he likes, and out of school he watches his back more than he had That Summer.

Eddie is more timid about it, because he's not bi like Richie. He's just gay, and just gay is often considered much, much worse than just being greedy, as some of the other kids at school call Richie. Eddie fights to keep this information from his mother, and she has yet to catch on. That's probably because she doesn't leave the house much nowadays.

To Richie, it's just another way to be defiant. He wasn't lying when he said he wasn't ashamed of himself or his relationship, and even though Eddie is sometimes afraid still, he'll hold Richie's hand at school and kiss Richie back. They're a good couple - solid and honest, and they know each other well enough to know when they need alone time and when they need each other.

Mike says that he was surprised at first, but that he shouldn't have been. He doesn't think any of the Seven would have been.

"You've always been like this," Mike shrugs when Richie asks what he means. "It's not a bad thing. I just think maybe you've always been meant for each other."

It's sappy enough to make Richie groan, but Eddie just kind of smiles to himself, because he knows that Richie knows it's true.

(January 1994)

Richie is lounging in Eddie's room one day waiting for him to get back from the picking up his prescriptions - Mrs. K would throw a fit if she knew he was there, but he came in through the window while she was asleep and she doesn't come into Eddie's room ever since that time she walked in on him jerking it. Richie had thought it was funny, Eddie had thought it was mortifying, and now it's just convenient.

When Eddie walks in grumbling to himself and not even surprised to see Richie laying on his bed, Richie has already found the tape.

"Did you make me a mix tape?" Richie asks curiously, turning the tape over and over in his hands. He hasn't played it because he didn't want to sound to draw Mrs. K upstairs, but he found it while searching for something to listen to later.

Eddie goes from exhausted and vaguely irritated to horrified in a second flat. "No!" he squeaks, and he leaps forward to try and take it. Richie's long arms prevail.

"But it has my name on it!"

"No, it doesn't!" Eddie protests desperately, but Richie has already figured it out and a wicked grin curls his lips upward.

"If it's not *for me*... did you make a tape *about* me, you sly dog?" Richie cackles out loud when Eddie shrieks. "I knew you were gay but I didn't know you were a *girl*!" Eddie's scrambling to try and get the tape from him, but even though he's grown he's not as lanky as Richie is and Richie's long limbs definitely prove to be the winners here. He slips off the bed and holds Eddie back long enough to shove the tape into Eddie's boombox and mash the play button with his thumb.

He then proceeds to hold back a struggling Eddie with both arms, laughing aloud as *Let's Hear it for the Boy* begins to play in the background.

Eddie fights him for the rest of the song, but by the time *I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)* is playing, he's already given in to Richie's attempts to twirl him around the room. By the time *Kiss*

starts, he's laughing, too.

By the time *(I Just) Died In Your Arms* finishes, Richie is pressing gentle kisses to Eddie's mouth with Eddie cradled underneath his body on the bed. One of Eddie's hands is buried in his hair.

Richie doesn't have the damndest idea what's on the rest of the tape.

(May 1994)

Later, Richie will have no idea how it happened. It seems completely unlikely, considering how much of a trouble kid he is, but Richie gets a full ride to a school in Colorado and a part of him desperately wants to get out of Derry. This full ride... it came out of nowhere, and it's his only chance. He won't be able to get the money to leave if he doesn't take this opportunity.

Later, he knows that it wasn't chance. It was whatever damn magic rules Derry.

Eddie gets into a school in New York, and his mother is going with him. They're both leaving, and they're not going where Richie is.

Eddie doesn't act like anything is wrong, and Richie is tempted to agree. It feels like the thing *to do*.

"We can go to different schools and still be together," Eddie points out, Richie's head in his lap. He's gently combing his fingers through Richie's messy brown curls. "I'll write you."

"I'll write your mom," Richie grumbles, but Eddie barely reacts.

"Those jokes got old when we were in middle school, fucker," he says calmly, and Richie wonders when Eddie stopped reacting to his bullshit. Oh, he can still get him going if he really tries, but more and more Richie's teasing is only that: teasing. He's not half as abrasive as he used to be and Eddie's softer around the edges. "I'm gonna write you all the time; you're gonna get bored of me."

Richie considers this. "Probably."

Eddie smacks him upside the head, but not very hard, because Richie's head is dangerously close to his dick. And wouldn't headbutting his balls be fun accidental payback for the smacking?

Instead of verbally assuring him that he's kidding, he takes Eddie's free hand and laces their fingers together. He likes this a lot, the weaving of their fingers, the slide of their palms. He likes it especially when they're sweaty, though it sounds unpleasant: there's something good in having to hold on tightly to not slip away. It's reassuring.

"You're gonna flunk out," Eddie sighs, and Richie can't say if he's right or not but he still snorts.

"Your faith in me is astounding." At that, he does turn his head. He doesn't get his head too much deeper into Eddie's lap, but he does kiss Eddie's hip, exposed by an old too-short shirt.

Eddie chuckles and is quiet for a long while. Richie is almost asleep when he speaks. "You'll write me back, won't you?"

Richie thinks back to how hard Eddie took it when Bill stopped writing. When Bev stopped writing. Then Stan, then Ben.

"I'll call you every night," he says, and Eddie looks warmed by it.

(August 1994)

Eddie leaves before Richie does. He sends three letters in one day, because he wants Eddie to know he's serious about doing long distance. The second night, he calls and Eddie picks up the phone, still laughing at something Richie can't see.

"Hello?"

"Babe?" Richie says, curious. "What's going on over there?"

"Richie! Baby," Eddie says brightly. "I was talking to my roommate. Sorry. How are you? What's going on in Derry?"

Eddie had opted to live in the dorms, because otherwise he'll be

living with his mother until he's thirty and he knows it.

"Not much," Richie says, settling in. Eddie's laughter makes him smile. "It's Derry; nothing's happened. Well, Mike fell off the quarry cliff yesterday instead of jumped. Does that count?"

"I think so." Eddie sighs. "I didn't realize until you called how much I already miss you. Is that weird?"

Richie thinks about the three letters he sent yesterday. "Nah, I don't think it's weird at all. So how's this roommate of yours? Do I have to be worried?"

Eddie starts telling him about Delany, a clever redhead who reminds him of Bill - Delany, who is incredibly straight, Eddie informs him cheerfully. He says this loud enough that Richie understands the significance of this, because the roommate is definitely still in the room. Eddie must have come out to him, and it went okay. Richie breathes a sigh of relief at that.

They talk until Eddie starts falling asleep, and then Richie hums. "Get some sleep, babe. I'll call tomorrow night, okay?"

Eddie yawns. "Kay. Love you, Rich."

He smiles to himself. "Love you, Eds."

He hangs up before Eddie finishes saying *don't call me that*.

(September 1994)

Once he gets properly settled into his new dorm room - complete with dickbag roommate - Richie realizes he's forgotten to call Eddie. He wrote a letter when he just got in and received a letter back, but since he put that letter with the rest of Eddie's correspondence under his bed, he almost hasn't thought about Eddie at all. He feels slightly uncomfortable when it occurs to him, but he fixes it by picking up the shitty landline phone he and his roommate went fifty-fifty on - the only thing they've agreed on thus far.



“Hello?”

Eddie's voice is a relief. A few moments ago he'd had trouble recalling what it sounded like.

“Hey, babe,” Richie greets him, and he settles in for a long conversation.

Instead of cheerfully greeting him, Eddie makes a confused sound. “Who is this?”

His eyebrows furrow. “Eddie?”

“Yes?”

“Eddie, babe? It's me, Richie.”

There's a moment, and then a quiet *fuck*. “I'm sorry, Richie - I don't know what I was thinking. You just... didn't sound familiar for a second.”

Richie forces down a stab of hurt. “That's okay, maybe it's this phone we got. It's shit. Like my *roommate*,” he says viciously, because the asshole's not in the room and he can. “I've been so busy I forgot to call, even though I agreed to buy a phone with him for our dorm so I *could* call you. I'm sorry.”

“That's okay,” Eddie hums. “No rule that says you have to call every night.”

“But I like to. Besides, I know you're still mad about...” Funny, he was going to say something, but the thought slipped right out of his mind. What *had* been the reason he made it a point to call every night? “Anyway. I like calling you. I missed your voice.” And now that he's hearing it again, he *does*.

“Me, too,” Eddie agrees, and there's an off note in his voice but it's still genuine. Richie doesn't think he's lying or anything - he can't place what's wrong, either. “It's weird having you so far away. I miss kissing you. I even miss your shitty jokes, can you believe that?”

“My jokes aren't shitty, so no, I can't,” he laughs, and Eddie chuckles

with him.

When they hang up later that night, Richie dreams of him, but when he wakes up there's only vague impressions.

He forgets to call Eddie again the next night.

(December 1994)

Richie isn't failing out of college. As a matter of fact, he's found an internship at the campus radio station, and while he's mostly an errand boy it's going really well. His roommate is still a dick, but they've struck up a truce and he privately thinks the only reason that worked out because he paid for half of the phone only his roommate uses out of goodwill.

He loves being out of his hometown, though he doesn't really think about it much. He just knows that this sense of freedom and comfort is new. Maybe it's because he's finally out of his parents' house and away from the *I wish I'd had a daughter, I wish I'd had a son who wasn't queer, I wish, I wish I didn't have you.*

He's not exactly shouting the fact that he's bi to the rooftops - after all, it's not like he has a boyfriend to show off, though sometimes he gets this pang in his gut when he thinks about it - but he's got a comfortable niche of friends who know. It's turning out to be good.

There's a water leak in his dorm one day, and there's a bunch of papers he finds under his bed that get entirely ruined. They're folded and thin, like letters, but he can't make out anything on them. The sight of them makes his heart clench, but he throws them out and promptly forgets all about them, even though there's a whisper in the back of his mind that he's missing something.

Time goes by fast, and before knows it, Derry is a footnote he doesn't even remember.

(April 1995)

Richie gets an actual job at the radio station - still small, but they say he's got promise, so long as he promises not to do the Voices. He promises, and now he's a dormroom name; they listen to him joke and shoot the shit and gossip about celebrities with bright eyed enthusiasm even at midnight. He's even pretty well liked on campus. It's literally his dream coming true.

Something's missing. He doesn't know what, and he hates it, but he moves forward. Eventually, he even forgets that something's missing at all.

(February 2016)

Richie's entire life is unrecognizable.

At the dawn of 2016, Richie is thirty-nine going on forty and everything is hectic. He's a radio DJ and a talk show host, a contemporary of Ellen Degeneres. He's openly bi, rich, and he's *happy*. He's having the time of his life, and he has been for damn near twenty years. It's like the second he left home (though hell if he remembers anything about that shitty town) everything started going right for him and it hasn't stopped since.

He's lonely, sometimes. That's unavoidable, because Richie isn't good at relationships and he never has been. Still, he gets laid every now and again and he's not looking bad for forty even if he's starting to go grey. He's in shape (because that's damn important if you're in front of cameras), and he's got the money for a nice wardrobe, including a four thousand dollar leather jacket that he wears too often to keep looking flawless but just enough to make it comfortable and familiar.

Richie doesn't talk to any of his family anymore, and he's not sorry about it. His dad died back in '98, within a week of Matthew Shepard, and Richie isn't ashamed to admit that even though he'd sobbed for the Shepard boy, he'd barely spared a moment for his father. His mother is in a home now, and good riddance.

"If only you could find someone to settle down with," a friend sighs at him one day, as she does nearly every week. "Then you'd have

everything.”

He thinks very hard about going on a date or two, and then winces at the idea of pulling someone into his crazy life. He had a childhood friend (a writer, whose books Richie reads religiously even if he isn't sure why and doesn't remember much of his friend at all) who married an actress, and sometimes Richie sees him with her in the papers and online looking uncomfortable in the light of camera flashes. Richie loves it, *lives* for it, but he doesn't want to drag someone into this life, not unless it's someone who loves him and wants him for *him* instead of that. At this point, dating will just bring people into it prematurely, and he's not interested. He also doesn't know anyone already involved that he wants to date. Really, he doesn't want to date at all. He mostly just wants to skip right to loving someone, to being ridiculously domestic, all those things he refuses to admit he wants out loud.

Still, he doesn't need love to be happy. He'll get laid and he'll laugh and he'll be fine, like he always has been.

(May 28th 2016)

“Richie? Richie Tozier?”

He's sitting in a cafe near the studio, where they get enough famous customers that they don't stare and the coffee is passable. He's got shades on, and is taking a well-deserved break, and frankly he didn't sign up for any random fans calling. God knows how he even got through.

The voice is unfamiliar, but Richie is curious. It could always be a director or someone like this, calling professionally. “Yes? How did you get my phone number?”

There's a long pause. “Your assistant gave it to me, once I mentioned that we were good friends back in the day. It's Mike Hanlon.”

Richie spends half a thought on how he's going to have a long talk with his assistant about giving his number to strange people, but then

everything clicks. “Mike?” Make that get his assistant a fruit basket, holy shit. He laughs out loud, delighted. “Mike Hanlon! Mikey! Fuck, man, how are you? It’s been, what, twenty years?”

“A little over,” Mike agrees, and his voice is a little brighter than before. “Twenty two or twenty three, I’d say. One of the two. Anyway, Richie, I didn’t just call to catch up. It’s back.” The brightness goes just as quickly as it had come.

Richie’s eyebrows furrow. “What’s back?” The muffin sitting in his stomach churns for seemingly no reason at all.

“It, Richie. *It*.”

There’s not some sudden understanding, but a feeling comes to him - pure dread, curling in his throat. He doesn’t know what to say, and considers laughing it off, but then he closes his eyes and gets a brief flash of *something*. A flash of sewer tunnels, of warm hands holding his, and the kind of fear that kills you.

“I... “ He struggles to speak. “That’s too bad, Mikey, but I don’t know \_”

“You made a promise,” Mike interrupts. He doesn’t sound angry; just firm. “You promised to come back if It did and now It has. Please, Richie, It’s killing kids again.” Then, like he *knows* what this will mean to Richie, he adds, “There was this gay boy a few months ago that got ripped apart underneath the Kissing Bridge. His boyfriend is this sweet kid, totally brokenhearted about it.”

“Fuck, Mike,” he says, harsh, and his eyes sting. He doesn’t know what’s wrong with him and he’s glad he’s wearing sunglasses.

“Please, Richie.” Then, hesitantly, “How’s the remembering?”

“The remembering?” he asks, because a lot isn’t making sense right now and he’s starting to think the issue is his memory.

“Once everyone left Derry... you all seemed to forget what happened, and about each other. Did you even remember I existed until I called? Do you remember anyone?”

It's just a sign of how wrong things are that he actually sweats to recall anyone. "I - we played with that writer Denbrough, right?"

Mike sighs heavily. He doesn't sound hurt, exactly, but there's a bone-deep sadness in his tone. "Yeah. We hung out with Bill. And Beverly, and Eddie, and Stan, and Ben." Each name comes with a flash, but they're just images. Faces. Still photos. Richie doesn't have a damn idea what the hell was going on. "Stan and Bill didn't remember either, not until I called. I think It made you forget."

"Why didn't you?" he asks, confused. It comes out more combative than he means for it to.

"I never left," Mike says in the vocal equivalent of a shrug. "So how could I forget? Anyway. Richie. Even if you just come for a day, to hear me out... please. I'm asking you to keep your promise and come back."

And that, as they say, is that.

(May 29th 2016)

Richie walks into the Chinese restaurant for their big lunch reunion a day later faux casually, as if he didn't fly across the country in a night to be here. He's excited to see his old friends and terrified at the same time. He'd begun remembering things the moment he'd come into Derry, upsetting things and wonderful things and odd things all alike. He's scared that seeing his friends will bring more memories, and he's not wrong.

Bill is the first face he sees, and it's a punch to the gut. He's bald now, but still handsome in a mature sort of way in his soft looking sweater and fitted slacks - Richie remembers suddenly the intense devotion they used to feel for Bill, their de facto leader. He lights up inside at the sight of him.

"Richie," Bill greets him, almost a sigh of relief, and Richie unfreezes.

"I'll be damned, Billy-boy," he replies, and he goes forward without prompting to pull his friend into a hug. "I'll be *damned*. Look at you!

Can't even bother with a toupe?"

Bill just laughs, big and full as always. "Why pretend I'm not bald," he chuckles. "Audra says it's distinguished."

"Audra is a *liar*," Richie tells him gleefully. "A filthy goddamn liar."

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Trashmouth," Bill tells him, grinning ear to ear.

Wasn't *that* nickname a blast from the past. "Shit, Billy, I missed you. Didn't even realize I did."

"Same here," Bill tells him with a smile. Then, he looks over Richie's shoulder and grins even wider. "Beverly Marsh!"

Richie turns and suddenly the love he feels for Beverly comes rushing back at the sight of her face. The memories aren't all there, but just like with Bill, the feelings are. The love he feels is as strong as it was the day Beverly left town.

She's a firecracker, as always, with her bright hair and huge smile - Richie feels no shame in racing Bill to give her a hug, and Bill collides into his back with a laugh. The three of them hug without shame, a long, hard embrace that feels like coming home.

Finally, Richie lets Bill and Bev catch up and goes to greet Mike. Mike, who had stuck around when no one else did - the last of the Losers' Club in Derry. Mike doesn't even say anything; he just smiles and holds his arms out. Richie reels him in and buries his face in Mike's neck. He kisses his cheek and beams at him.

"Welcome back," Mike says at last. "It's good to see you."

"You are a sight for sore eyes, Michael-my-boy," he tells him, and he means it. "God, I missed the three of you."

Michael pauses. "What about Eddie?"

"I don't really remember him yet," Richie shrugs. Mike makes a face.

"Well, sure, but how did you guys forget in the first place? I thought

for sure you'd go off and live together after you left town. I mean, you went to college but you planned to stay together." Mike's face is perplexed, but Richie doesn't have the answers. Together? Weird phrasing. Something niggles at him, from the back of his mind.

"Look, Mikey, I only remember surface bits. I could tell you what he looked like, maybe, but I don't really remember shit except that we knew each other. That we were close. Weren't we? I assume we were, since he was part of the lucky Seven." Richie knows it sounds calloused, but the way Mike is looking at him makes him feel like he's missing something huge.

Mike's eyebrows furrow, his mouth turning down into something infinitely sadder, but he lets it go.

They chat for ten minutes, the four of them - they're still missing Eddie, Ben, and Stan, but Richie only has the vaguest notions of that. They're names he knows, but he can barely put faces to them. He knows that'll change once they show up, but for now he's at ease - and happier than he has been in a long time.

And then he glances at the door.

A new face walks in - new because it's older, older and stronger but still so familiar. He's still thin, Richie thinks. Still short. His hair is still dark and not yet streaked with grey, the way Richie's is starting to be (although he's told it looks distinguished, and not in the way Bill claimed his baldness was). He's wearing a loose fitting white shirt with opal buttons down the front, a dark grey blazer, and well fitted black cigarette legged jeans. His shoes are polished. He has an iPhone in his hand in a simple black case and the other is tucked into the pocket of his jeans. He walks hesitantly, but there's a calmness to him that wasn't there as children. His eyebrows, Richie thinks in surprise as emotion and snapshots of memory flood him, are still thick and dark, but they fit his face better now. His nose is still covered in freckles. Richie remembers suddenly trying to kiss each one even though it was impossible.

Eddie is beautiful, and at the sight of him Richie abruptly sobs aloud, his chest clenching with a feeling so strong he can't do anything except stand there and break apart. He stares forward, confused,



trying to figure out why the sight of this man is making what's left of his lonely heart contract so surely he's positive he's having a heart attack.

Bill looks around Bev in confusion. "What's wrong, Rich - oh, Eddie!" Bill's eyes are sparkling, but Eddie doesn't even look at him, because he's staring at Richie, too, with this horrified expression that Richie knows must be mirrored on his face.

Bill goes to hug Eddie, but then he lets out a horrible sound as well. Bill freezes, maybe because he sees the tears in Eddie's eyes, but neither of them know how to explain the sudden *love* and loss and total heartbreak that's hitting them both at the same moment.

A voice in the back of his mind screams that this is *ridiculous*, that he's falling apart over a childhood romance – but it was never just a childhood love, and even if it was, he'd never had the chance to fall out of it. He's standing here, drowning in the love he felt at seventeen, and he doesn't know how to handle it.

"What's going on?" Beverly asks, scared, and he understands why because none of the other reunions had been like this. He understands, but Richie can't explain or do anything at all because this is *Eddie*. The realization hits him, wild and fierce. The Eddie he loved so hard and with such intense surety that it's a million times worse that he *forgot* him. Forgot him like all the others, but not the same, because while Richie loves every member of the Losers' Club (*would die for them*), he loves Eddie the same all-consuming way that Ben had loved Beverly.

It's worse because they'd *had* it, and then they had gone to college and *forgotten each other*.

It's twenty-two years of longing that he hasn't been able to name. It's twenty-two years of not dating, of casual fucks and being labeled a commitmentphobe because he always felt like something was wrong with every relationship he had. It's twenty-two years of feeling like a vital part of himself was missing, only those feelings had been muted and shoved into the background, and now they're all slamming to the foreground with enough force to choke him.

Eddie takes a stumbling step forward, and then Richie breaks - he sweeps across the room and yanks Eddie into his arms so hard they both get the breath knocked out of them at the impact. He doesn't quite remember ever having had Eddie in his arms before but he knows in his gut that this is it. This had been so important to him, to the very core of him, and then it had been buried. This man in his arms - this man that had been the boy he loved and is now a man who grew up without him - is the entire world, for as much as Richie acknowledges it.

It takes a long moment for Richie to realize Eddie is crying into his neck so hard he's making Richie tremble with the force of it - but maybe Richie is making Eddie tremble with *his* tears. It doesn't matter.

"I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*," he forces out, again and again, and he hardly realizes he's saying it. It doesn't matter if Eddie's married or moved on - it only matters that they're in each other's arms for the first time in twenty-two years.

Eddie's arms tighten around him, clenched in the back of his shirt, and he's suddenly kissing Richie's neck, his cheek, his lips - anywhere he can reach until Richie cups his face and steadies him and pulls him into a proper kiss. A proper hello, and a proper apology as well.

They're both crying and vulnerable, but Richie won't complain about it because Eddie's been out of his grasp for *twenty two years* and he knows now that this is everything he's been missing.

"I loved you," he breathes, and then he says it again. "God, I *still* love you, Eddie - I'm so sorry."

He remembers a time, suddenly, when Eddie would have laughed at him for being sappy. When he would have made fun of him, and called him an idiot. He remembers another time, the *first* time, when Eddie had looked into his eyes and then kissed him so hard it stole his breath. So many I love yous, even if the details are muddy.

Eddie says it back, quietly, and then louder, until he's sobbing the words.

Ben walks in at some point. He doesn't look much at all like he used to, but Richie can't pull himself away from Eddie.

"What the hell is going on here?" he says, and in the background Richie is vaguely aware that Mike shushes him.

When they're calm again, or at least passably so, they sit down. There's no pretense, either - Richie sits down because his legs won't hold him up and Eddie flings himself into Richie's lap like he can't help himself. He wraps his arms around Richie's neck and he buries his face there so he doesn't have to look at the others.

"After you guys left," Richie says, voice hoarse. "Eddie Spaghetti here and me got together, at least from what I can gather."

Eddie sobs a laugh. "Don't fucking call me that, you fucknut. God, you never change." Abruptly, he pulls back enough to press hard kisses to both his cheeks before burying his face in Richie's neck again. "Never change," he whispers.

"You did get together," Mike's clarifying, not hearing Eddie's last comment. "In sophomore year of high school. It was all very epic romance. Shakespeare, eat your heart out." He raises a glass in their direction.

"You're gay?" Bill asks Richie, his eyebrows climbing up to where his hairline would be.

"I am *bisexual*, Big Bill," Richie informs him snidely. "Eddie here is as gay as Boy George, but you can't help that."

"Are you ever going to let that go?" Eddie demands, starting to sound less like he's about to burst back into hysterical tears. Richie figures that's a sign to keep talking.

"You were a sixteen year old boy obsessed with Culture Club," Richie deadpans, and grins at Eddie helplessly when he gets the same flat expression he remembers so fondly (now) from childhood, red eyes aside. "No, I don't think I'm ever going to get over it."

"You listened to it with me, so beep fucking beep, Richie," Eddie says.

Beverly snickers, pulling their attention over to her. Eddie starts to get offended, but then she says aloud, "Could have been New Kids on the Block." She laughs louder after saying it, even though none of them get the joke - at least, Richie doesn't think so, right up until Ben flushes and glares at her mock-seriously.

"I thought that was going to stay a *secret*, Bev Marsh," he berates her, but she just laughs louder and he can't hold the expression. He cracks almost immediately and grins. Richie can see the torch he's carrying is still as strong as ever.

Eddie smiles at them, a gentle smile. The last time they'd all been together, they were contrary middle school boys and Eddie spent so much time yelling and calling them idiots, but now the affection Eddie feels is on his sleeve. Richie doesn't even want to imagine how much of his own adoration is open on his face for anyone to see. "It's kind of funny, though," Eddie says, almost off-hand. His voice is still a little hoarse from the crying. "I don't remember much of the details."

"Of the two of you?" Mike asks, sounding interested. Richie looks over at him, then back at Eddie, who nods.

"I know we were together, and I feel -" He cuts off, colors, and looks at Richie. Something he sees in Richie's eyes encourages him to go on. "I still feel the same things. The same way. I know how I felt and I still feel it, but I don't remember any of the specifics. It's all fuzzy. I don't remember much from Derry, really."

"Me either," Richie agrees, not realizing how much is missing until he says it. "God, the Culture Club thing - I'd actually forgotten, right until I said Boy George. It slipped off the tongue and the memory came rushing back."

"Same for me," Eddie says, finally wiping the wetness away from his face. He sits up properly, but he still has an arm around Richie's shoulders. He won't be moving any time soon.

"I'm remembering old stuff, too," Beverly says. "Although I don't remember this." She gestures towards the two of them, but she's smiling - she looks so *happy* for them it breaks Richie's heart. Then, she pauses, right as Ben goes to say something. "Actually. Maybe I do. You two *were* always pretty close. The more I think about it, the less surprised I am."

"That's what I said," Mike agreed with a laugh, and they move into other topics. Richie and Eddie don't move at all.

By the end of the night, they're all emotionally exhausted. Mike has updated them - he explained about Stan committing suicide (*Stannofuckno*, part of his mind screams hysterically, while the other half whispers that he should probably do the same), and then about Adrian Mellon and the eight other victims. It gets weirder, because Richie only has the vaguest ideas of the monster they're all talking about, and he's getting lost in *Derry* again. Enough to be a dick, apparently.

When Mike passes around the photo of Georgie - that sweet boy who Richie doesn't remember at all - Eddie starts wheezing, and he fumbles on Richie's lap for his inhaler.

Reflexively, without even thinking about it, he says, "Eddie Kaspbrak blasts off!" It's gleeful, and gets a laugh for two from the group in spite of the mood. Even Eddie looks cheered by it. But then, his mouth keeps going, and it's eerie how little he even knows it's happening until it's happened. "*Today in Derry*," his old shitty MovieTone Newsreel Narrator Voice says. "A whole city turns out for Asthmatics on Parade, and the star of the show is Big Ed the Snothead, known all over New England as -"

The entire table is still. Eddie is still sitting on his lap, but his hand is clenched in Richie's black henley and it's not for comfort. It's a fist.

Richie is as bewildered as they are, and his hand shakily reaches up - to what? He doesn't know, until he suddenly remembers how familiar the gesture is. Pushing up his glasses. Glasses he doesn't even *have* anymore, for fuck's sake.

"Baby," he says, and that's reflex, too, but he doesn't apologize for that one. "I'm sorry. That was cruel. I don't - I don't know what the hell I was saying."

Eddie is very pale, but he nods. There's no blame in his eyes and thank God for that. "I know." He places a deliberate kiss on Richie's mouth. When he pulls away, he meets Richie's eyes. "You're a fuckhead," he finishes, and Richie just nods. It makes his boy smile - smile big enough that he actually looks like Richie's boy again. "No, it's the memories. Everything coming back. It's jarring." Richie nods at that, too, because it's true. He just hadn't realized it until Eddie said it. Like the emotions he feels for everyone, other things are coming back, too - habits and attitudes, shitty behaviors and childlike ones alike.

Maybe on purpose, Ben interrupts. "Did you just call him *baby*?" There's a bit of a laugh to it, more than Richie would have expected considering everything. "That's... that's really gay. Holy shit."

"Ben Hanscom, don't be mean," Beverly chides, but she's grinning a little, too.

"*I'm* gay, fucknut," Eddie says snidely, and Richie buries a smile in his shoulder at the confident way he says it.

"Yeah, but you're not the one calling another man *baby*," Ben points out, still chuckling. "Richie Tozier, the man who talked about vagina more than *anyone else I've ever met*, just called you baby. This is the funniest moment of my life."

"How is this funnier than watching them make out for five minutes?" Bill asks wonderingly, and Mike just chuckles at all of them. He looks like he needed it, but even if he needed the laugh he doesn't let them stay off track.

He points out the obvious - the fact that they're all filthy rich, the fact that they're all childless, the fact that they're being drawn back by more than Mike. Bits and pieces are coming back - Richie groans aloud as he remembers the werewolf - and honestly, he doesn't want them to. But he stays, and that's what's important. Even when Mike starts talking about going back into the sewers, he stays.

He wants to go home. He wants to walk away, fuck It, fuck the clown, fuck all of them - but then he thinks about the fuzziness of his childhood memories, about how he's spent twenty-two years without thinking of Eddie at all, as if that's possible considering how fucking mad Richie still is for him.

He thinks about Eddie, about losing him again, and about the dead children. The dead children he doesn't even remember from when they were kids.

Bill raises his hand, says he wants to fight It and kill It for good, and Richie throws all of his sanity to the wind and raises his own. "What the hell," he sighs. "Can't be worse than interviewing Ozzy, can it?"

One by one, they each raise their hands until it's unanimous and decided. Eddie is the last, and he looks so afraid Richie wants to lower his hand and sweep them out of the room and out of this town, but together this time. He'll fight to keep him.

Just when he's about to do it, to really say *fuck you all* in spite of the pit in his stomach saying he needs to stay, Eddie shifts his aspirator into the hand still clenched in Richie's shirt and raises his now free right hand.

"Way to go, Eds," he says. His voice is wavering. "We're really gonna have ourselves a laugh or two this time, I bet."

Eddie looks back at him, all conflicted and doe-eyed. It would be cute if he didn't look as scared as Richie feels. "Beep beep, Richie."

They chat a little more, and plan to walk around the city alone to see if It will happen upon them the way it had the first go around. Richie is loath to even talk about separating from Eddie, but Eddie nods like this makes logical sense.

And then, their fortune cookies arrive. It shocks the hell out of him when his cracks open to show an eye - and even more when Eddie's is barely cracked before it spits out some mutated monster bug the size of his hand. The both of them yank back so hard they nearly upend the chair, and Eddie's out of his lap and backing away with his inhaler in his mouth before he can even curse aloud. Richie joins

him, tripping around the chair so that he can pull Eddie's shaking body against his side.

Everyone watches as their monster cookies wreak havoc (excepting for Beverly's, whose cookie was only filled with blood). Richie bites down on his lower lip so hard it feels swollen later underneath his tongue.

"We meet at the library at seven tonight," Bill reminds them weakly, and Richie swallows and nods along with the rest of them. He's already regretting agreeing.

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Richie walks around for a while before he sees the Paul Bunyan statue and sits down by it, like his instincts tell him to. He's not scared of the statue anymore, though he's swiftly remembering when It had attacked him with it as a child. He doesn't know what the clown could possibly come up with this time, but he knows It'll manage. It always does.

He reminisces for a while - not good memories by any means, but he reflects all the same - until he realizes that thinking about It is probably what brings It back. And It is back.

It's a giant statue, all right, but it's not the clown and it's not Paul-with-his-giant-ax-Bunyan either.

It's Eddie. Dead Eddie.

"Traditional," he jokes automatically, because this isn't the first time It's used Eddie against him. He remembers that in a flash. It still doesn't help the crackle of fear that thrums in his heart, because old tricks or not, this one works.

"Hey there, Richie!" Dead Eddie greets him in It's voice. His face is stationary - probably because his face is half-rotten. Only his mouth moves. His eyes are empty holes, dark pits like the clown's. "Ready to finally die?"

Dead Eddie takes one huge, stumbling step forward. "Or maybe you won't! Maybe I'll leave you alive, so you can watch all your friends



die first! And little Eddie, he'll go so slow." One of Dead Eddie's arms creaks alarmingly, the skin of his left shoulder visibly tearing. Richie can't even properly work up a scream.

"And you can watch him go, Richie! And then you'll forget." It's voice *booms*. "You'll forget all about him except in your dreams, and you'll watch him die again and again every night! You won't even remember in the morning." Dead Eddie's eyes, or what's left of them, seem to bore into his soul. "But your mind will remember every night, oh yes it will."

Richie swallows.

"I could have you now if I wanted you now," It says, conversationally if not for the way his voice makes Richie's ears ring. "But this is going to be too much fun."

He responds automatically, like he'd made the crack about Eddie in the restaurant. "Fun for me, too. The most fun of all when we come to take your fucking head off, *baby*." The last word is half a parody, a joke, because It's wearing his boy's face. But the joke is that he loves Eddie enough that saying it, even to this grotesque nightmare, warms him.

His boy. His fucking *baby*, Ben's teasing be damned.

It says some shit after that, but Richie doesn't remember any of it because he's thinking about Eddie. It's how he keeps sane, up until the moment that he runs away like he's thirteen again and racing the guys around the Barrens with a toy gun.

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He stumbles into the library two and a half hours later and the first thing he does is search for Eddie's face with something like panic in his chest. He finds him almost immediately, sitting in a comfortable looking chair but ashen, like he'd seen something he hadn't wanted to. Richie knows the feeling.

He goes to Eddie immediately.

Behind them, Beverly snorts a little. "Jeez, Rich. It's good to know

you missed *all* of us. You ever gonna let Eddie be his own person again or do you think you'll handcuff him to you?"

Normally, they'd all laugh about it, but if possible, Eddie's huge get more scared like she's reminded him of something he'd rather forget. "You know what," he says thinly, clutching at Richie's arm. "I'm not actually opposed to that. Fuck me, right? Here I am, volunteering to get handcuffed to the Trashmouth." There's a bout of hysterical laughter that bubbles up his throat. "But you know what," he says again. "You know, that's okay, because not three hours ago I watched Patrick Hockstetter and all these dead people chase me out of the ball park and *one of them was Richie -*"

Richie cups his face roughly in both hands and makes Eddie look at him. "I'm alive. You're alive, too, and that fucker isn't getting either of us. You're never gonna see me die and I'm never gonna see you die and that bastard can stop using that as fear-bait because it's not going to work."

Eddie looked about ready to tear up again. "You too, huh?"

He smiles wryly and hopes it's not as shaky as he feels. "It's not that clever, all things considered. Uses the same dirty tricks. You're pretty cute even when you're decomposing, babe."

Eddie snort-wheezes. "That's reassuring. You look great missing an eye."

"Flatterer."

He settles in at Eddie's feet. He could get a chair, probably, but he leans his head against Eddie's knee and it brings back memories of laying with his head in Eddie's lap. Eddie had loved to play with his curls as much as Richie had loved for him to do it.

They stay in the library for hours, into the early morning, and they tell stories and share details about their lives. Beverly is married, but separated as of *literally a day*, and Bill tells them about his movie star wife, Audra, who is the love of his life if you take him at face value. Beverly - and they all watch her reaction carefully - looks so happy for him. Ben especially looks happy that she's happy.

Eddie has a driving company based in New York, smaller than Uber but successful all the same. It's marketed for safety toward minorities, especially LGBT youth. It's funny, almost, to realize that he knows the company. As a matter of fact, he uses it almost exclusively when he's in New York.

Ben is an architect, no surprise there - Richie remembers now Ben directing them to build a damn, leading them in the building of their underground clubhouse. Ben had always had the talent for it.

Mike doesn't have a lot to say, but he looks just as content as Richie feels to share his small life with the people who had begun it with him.

At the end of the night, when they're planning to head to their hotel, Bev's hand splits open. Richie's immediately concerned, especially considering how fucked up blood makes her, but then his own hand is splitting, and one by one they realize each of their hands are opening along the lines of their old blood-promise scars.

As if they'll die if they don't, they take hands again, closing the circle, and everything seems to happen at once: the doors slam shut, the clock behind them chimes once. Then it all drops and so do their hands.

Richie pulls Eddie close again, because he can't *not*.

"I remembered," Beverly says, looking at Bill with huge eyes. "I remembered *everything*. My father finding out about you guys. It and... *everything*."

"Yeah," Richie chokes. He holds Eddie tight, scared to lose him. "I do, too."

His boy, his *man*, nods. "The well, under the house on Neibolt Street \_."

Everyone is agreeing shakily. "Go back now," Mike says. "To the hotel. Get some rest; it's late."

"Walk with us, Mike," Bev says, holding out a hand for his, but Mike shakes his head.

“No. I have to lock up, and write a few things down... I won’t be too long. You guys go ahead.” Mike smiles at them, preoccupied but not misleading. Richie trusts that he means to follow and he leads Eddie out into the street.

They stand on the top step of the library while everyone else filters onto the sidewalk, and Eddie pauses him when Richie goes to join them. “Come back to my room with me,” Eddie says quickly. There’s no mistaking the intentions in his eyes, and Richie can’t say no any more than he can let go of Eddie’s hand right now.

Eddie doesn’t wait for him to answer; he sees the agreement in Richie’s eyes and nods. When Richie goes to lead him after the others, he moves easily as if he’d never resisted in the first place.

Eddie’s room is on the top floor, and they climb up silently. There’s really no need to talk at all. They stop outside room 609 only long enough for Eddie to open it with his key card, and then they’re shucking clothes - or more accurately, Eddie is yanking Richie’s henley over his head and ripping his own blazer off. He yanks his inhaler out of his pocket and lets Richie set it aside on the nightstand. His shirt comes off with barely enough care to spare the buttons, and Eddie’s expression is damn near desperate when he pushes Richie down onto the bed. Richie remembers now, better than ever thanks to the trickery with their blood-oath scars, every time they’ve done this before.

It’s not like it used to be at all - for one, they’re older, and Eddie moves with the kind of surety that only comes with practice. Richie isn’t upset about it, because his hands are more sure, too, and he knows that he’s never touched anyone with the reverence that he touches Eddie with. He explores his body, reacquaints himself, by running his hands all over it. Not just the sexy bits - although he cops a feel or twenty of all those places, too - but his arms and stomach, his throat and his thighs. Every place where Eddie’s body is familiar and every place where it’s new.

Eddie doesn’t let him take charge, and Richie doesn’t try to when Eddie is determined. Richie would let Eddie do whatever he wanted with his body, but all he does is straddle Richie and make him lay there without helping while Eddie preps himself with the lube he

takes a quick detour to get from his toiletry bag. Richie would like to do that, but he keeps his hands busy with Eddie's skin, with rubbing soothingly over the twitching muscles of his thighs.

Neither of them last long once Eddie's dropped himself with surprising force down onto Richie, but neither of them quite want to, either.

"I love you," Eddie says, head thrown back. Richie has both hands on his hips, and his chest is heaving. "I love you love you love you."

Richie gasps at the feeling building inside of him, in his chest and belly and where they're connected. "I love you, too," he manages before a blinding force rushes through him, something entirely unnatural but still so right it makes him ache.

Eddie is gasping too, and the second Richie slips out of him, dripping, he reaches out to grab his inhaler and takes a grateful puff.

"I haven't had a lot of sex lately but I don't remember it being like that," he wheezes, and Richie soothes him as much as he can. Eddie calms down eventually and settles in to lie mostly on top of him.

"I don't either," Richie agrees. "Look at us go." Eddie snorts against his skin, letting the inhaler fall to the floor next to the bed. They clean up after a bit, but they wind up back in bed, nearly in the same position, with Eddie's fingers rubbing circles into Richie's collar.

They fall asleep like that, wrapped up in each other, but not too long afterwards there's a knock on the door. It's quiet at first, but turns into pounding when there's no response.

Eddie climbs out of bed first, grumbling and groping along the ground for his jeans. He picks something up - nope, it's a shirt. When he's finally dressed, and Richie has managed to pull his briefs on so he's at least semi decent, Eddie stumbles to the door. Richie's already back in bed.

"Whozit?" he yawns. Richie debates going back to sleep.

"Bellboy, sir," an unfamiliar voice says. Are bellboys even still a thing? In big fancy hotels, sure, but that this hotel is not. "Message

from your wife.”

Richie blinks, no longer tired. Something about this seems wrong, and Eddie’s concerned expression backs his bad feeling up. Unless Eddie’s lying to him, he isn’t married, and Eddie’s never been much of a liar.

“I think you have the wrong room,” Eddie calls slowly without opening the door. “I’m not married.”

“My apologies - the message is from a woman. I assumed she was your wife.” There’s something grating about the voice that makes Richie get up to come up and watch Eddie’s back.

Eddie slowly opens the door. The face behind it - certainly not a bellboy - is only vaguely familiar, but it’s familiar enough that when Henry Bowers’ hand jerks forward with a blade in hand, Eddie slams the door shut on him. It hurts his hand, but it doesn’t stop Bowers from forcing the door open. Eddie nearly goes sprawling, but luckily Bowers is not expecting Richie.

That’s not to say he goes down without a fight - because he does not. He spits and wrestles and unlike Richie and Eddie, he is here to kill. He had only been expecting one man, however, and that puts the balance in their favor.

Somehow - Richie loses track of the details - Eddie gets ahold of a bottle that gets broken in the shuffle. Bowers doesn’t seem to notice it - he’s too busy trying to get at Eddie.

“Babyfag,” he grits out. “Teach you to throw rocks.”

Richie has the strangest feeling he’s referencing the rock war from when they were *kids*. How could he still be stewing on that, thirty years later? He doesn’t think Bowers is sane enough to answer, and he’s too busy wrestling Bowers back to ask.

“And you!” Bowers says, turning on Richie so quickly he can’t stop the switchblade from sinking into his arm. He cries out, grabbing at Bowers’ wrist to stop him from slashing at him anymore. “Babyfag’s four eyes boyfriend. Always knew it. You too, everything’s your fault.

Once you die there'll be no more voices, no *more* -“

Richie shoves him backward when Bowers tries to throw him off balance. It happens fast after that - he goes tumbling over Eddie, and almost catches himself. He very nearly crushes Eddie, with his arms extended just in time to catch his fall, but something else catches him.

The broken bottle in Eddie's hands.

It goes in cleanly, because Bowers went down like a *tree*, and Eddie lays there under him wheezing for several long moments. A pool of blood spreads out beneath them and Richie prays it's Bowers'.

“Baby,” Richie chokes, and Eddie's arm starts flailing. Richie trips over himself trying to get to the bed, and he gropes at the floor for Eddie's inhaler. When he finds it, he curls his fingers around it and stands again simultaneously, almost losing it. He gets a firmer grip on it and he hands it to Eddie, letting him get what he needs while he yanks Bowers' death-heavy body away. The second most of the weight's off of him, Eddie scrambles backwards, out from under.

“Call Bill,” Eddie gasps, and Richie does as he's told. His pants are on the floor and he grabs at them, feeling for the rectangular bulge in his pocket. He yanks it out with trembling fingers. It's not until he has it unlocked that he realizes that he doesn't even have Bill's number.

“Jesus *fuck*,” he hisses, and he reaches for the corded phone sitting on the nightstand. He has the front office call Bill, and after a bit of a squabble with the desk person over the time, Bill's groggy voice comes through loud and clear. Richie had been almost scared it would be Pennywise's voice on the other end.

“H-hello?”

“Bill,” Richie sighs in relief. “I need you to get over here. Gather everyone you can.”

There's a rustling sound, and strangely, Beverly's voice in the background asking what was wrong. “What's going on? Richie?”

"I'm in Eddie's room, 609. Fuck, Bill," he says, glancing over at Bowers' body. "It's Henry *goddamn* Bowers. He just showed up, out of the blue, blabbering about voices and that rock war."

"Y-you th-think It had a-anything to do - to do with it?" Bill asks. There's a lot of rustling on his end; hopefully Bill getting dressed.

"I don't think Bowers got out of Juniper Hills on his own," Richie says grimly. "Although I doubt we'll ever find out the details. Fuck. Bill, I think he's dead. I think me and Eddie killed him. He tried to kill us both."

"Are you two okay?" A surge of love for Bill hits him and he smiles. It's thin and small, but a smile.

"We could be better, and I don't think Eddie's going to be leaving his inhaler behind any time soon, but yeah. We're both alive and I don't think either of us are hurt too bad." He glances over at Eddie, who gives him a grimace and a thumbs up. "Just... hurry."

Bill agrees, and Richie hangs up the phone. He walks over, stepping around Bowers' body, to kneel next to Eddie. He puts a hand on the nape of his neck and Eddie relaxes into it gratefully.

"You okay?" he asks. Eddie shrugs.

"He's not a hellbeast that shows me my worst fears, so I think I'll make it," Eddie says wryly. "He did hurt my arm, though. It's ached all day, along where the break was when we were kids. I think it's the town, reminding us that we're back. As if I could forget."

There are no visible issues with his arm, and Richie agrees that's it's probably *Derry* - just like the scars that opened on their palms.

He's got Eddie on the bed resting when Bill arrives with Bev in tow. "Thank god you guys are here," he says in relief, and then blinks in confusion when they just stare at him. It takes a moment or two to realize he's still standing around in briefs. "I know I'm a glorious specimen of manhood, but can we please focus on the issue at hand?"

"It's not my fault you're standing nearly naked in Eddie's room," Beverly says faux-innocently. In spite of the corpse in the middle of



the room, Bill snickers next to her. Which reminds him.

"Funny," Richie deadpans. "I'm pretty sure I heard someone else in the room when I called you, Bill. Wonder who that could have been?" Beverly flushes, but Richie doesn't really give a damn. They've been half-in-love forever anyway, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out that for the both of them it was more of a reunion/closure thing, anyway. Bill's crazy about his wife and Richie's been rooting for Ben and Bev since childhood.

"What do we do with the body?" Eddie interjects. He's sitting up in the bed, although Richie told him to *lay the fuck down*, and his eyes keep shifting back and forth between Bowers' corpse and Bill. "Should we call the cops?"

Bev snort-laughes. It's a bitter sound. "The adults in this town always turn a blind eye. They're meant to be kept out of Its way - if we call the cops we're fucked, don't you think?"

"Your plan is to just leave it here?" Richie asks incredulously. "Just... walk out of this hotel and leave a *body* in one of the rooms. Don't you think that'll come back to bite you in the ass later?"

Bev looks at him with huge, sad eyes. "I don't think we'll have asses to bite if we let this get in our way. That's what It wanted - to stop us, or get us out of the way early." She looks down at the body, some sort of complicated pity in her eyes.

"C-call the uh-others," Bill suggests. "We'll s-s-see what they th-think."

Bev does the actual calling. Ben agrees to come up immediately, and she calls Mike's home phone. She'd apparently saved it from when he called her and asked her to come - but he doesn't answer. It rings for long, tense minutes, and goes to voicemail.

"Try the luh-library," Bill suggests, and she does, after a quick google search for the number on her phone. While she's still waiting for it to ring, Ben walks in. They have to shush him quiet when he sees the body on the floor, and he goes positively green when Richie explains quietly that he's dead.

"Hello," Bev says, and they all quiet for her. "Is Mr. Hanlon there?" Bev pauses, and bites down on her lower lip in concern. "Who are you?" she says after a beat. "You're not Mr. Hanlon."

Something in Bev's face when the person on the other end speaks makes Richie go stiff. *Not Mike*, he thinks, desperate.

"How badly has he been hurt?" A long silence. "I... I'm afraid I can't tell you. Not just yet." Pause. "Nothing! What makes you think I do? Jesus Christ!" Pause. Eddie's hand slips into his and Richie squeezes. "He might die? You're not just saying that to scare me? He might actually die?" Her voice breaks. "Please tell me."

In a few moments, she hangs the phone up with something close to a slam and turns to Bill, burying her face in his neck. Ben rubs her shoulder, him and Bill protecting her from whatever the person on the other end said, but Richie got the gist.

He calls the hospital, because he doesn't know what else to do and everyone else is preoccupied. He's on the phone for nearly half an hour, lying to the nurse handling the phone that he's a reporter from the *Derry News*.

"Well," Richie's saying, spitting bullshit out like gold. "What we usually do in cases like this is to quote you as 'a source.' Then, later on, we can... uh huh. Right! Just right!" He laughs aloud, and wipes his hand across his forehead. It comes away damp with sweat. At his side, sitting on the edge of the bed, Eddie is leaning against him with both hands clutching his left and Eddie's forehead pressed against Richie's arm. "Okay, Mr. Kerpaskian. Yes. I'll... yeah, i got it. K-E-R-P-A-S-K-I-A-N, right. Czech Jewish, is it? That's unusual. Of course. Yes, I will. Goodnight. Thank you for your help."

"Jesus," he spits when he sets the phone down again. He thinks it's probably the first time in ages that the landline in this room has been used so much. "Jesus, Jesus, *Jesus*." He sits down, frees his hand from Eddie's, and buries his face in both of his own. Eddie wraps his arms around Richie's torso.

He explains what he knows - that Mike's hurt, in critical condition. Bowers - because of course it was Bowers; he'd stopped by the library

before coming here - had torn him apart pretty good. Richie has a sick feeling of *gladness* at the sight of Bowers' corpse.

"We're two down," Bev says when they're all quiet. Then she ducks her head, maybe thinking of poor Stan. "We really can't go to the police right now. We've... we need to finish this. Now."

Richie hates that he agrees - hates that this is even on his to-do list in the first place. He never wants to go into the sewers again and he barely remembers any of it.

"How the hell do you expect us to get down there?" Richie asks, half-hoping that his logic is going to derail the whole plan. "I'd bet my own ass, and Eddie's too, that we're not going to be able to fit through that hole in the well."

"I think we'd still f-fit," Bill says dryly. "Buh-but I was th-thinking we c-c-could go in th-through the p-pumping station. They ha-have those m-manholes."

Richie hates that Bill always has a plan. It comes in handy when they're in deep shit, and gets them into deep shit when they're not.

Once they make the decision, Ben, Bev, and Bill all filter out to go get dressed. Richie and Eddie remain sitting on the edge of the bed in silence.

"I don't want to go back," Eddie whispers. "I don't. What if we don't come out again?"

He doesn't have a good answer, but Eddie needs *something*. "We all came back out last time."

"We're two down," Eddie reminds him dully. "And honestly, doing the impossible once doesn't make it any more likely we'll be able to do it twice."

He's got a point there.

Richie lets out a long breath. He wishes he had the answer, but he doesn't. "No matter what," he says instead. "I'm going to bring you home."

Eddie's shoulders tremble a little and he presses a kiss to Richie's cheek. "I'll bring you home too, Rich." After a pause, he speaks again. "Will we be together again when we come back out? *Can* we be together again? Or was this just... nostalgia and closure, like with Bill and Bev?"

For such a smart man, his boy can be such an idiot.

"As far as I'm concerned, we were back together the second you walked into that restaurant," he answers. "God knows the only reason we ever weren't was because we forgot each other. And when we come out, we'll do it for keeps this time, no forgetting or leaving each other behind. We leave together and stay together."

Eddie nods against his shoulder. "I can probably work from LA, or start a Cali office," he says.

"Mi casa es su casa," he murmurs. "Literally. If you want it, my home is yours."

He gets a gentle kiss for his trouble, and then they start getting properly dressed. Eddie leaves his blazer behind and swaps his white button down for one of Richie's black tees. Richie just throws his jeans and Henley back on.

"There's gonna be no saving those shoes," he warns, nodding toward Eddie's feet.

"I have more shoes. They're not my priority." He shoves his inhaler in his pocket, grabs his phone with one hand and, as if to highlight his point, grabs Richie's with the other. "Don't you let go of me unless you have to," he demands. His eyes are huge and almost black in the low light from the bedside lamp. "The whole time we're down there, Richie, I mean it."

"Same goes for you, Eds."

"Don't even," he says with an eye roll. "I hate that and you know it. Why do you say that when you know I hate it?"

Richie reaches over to pinch his cheek gently. "It's 'cause I love you, obviously."

Eddie glares at him half-heartedly, though he still lets Richie lead him toward the door. "I wish you'd find other ways to show it. Pulling pigtailed is very middle school of you."

Richie grins at him knowingly. "You love it. I keep you young. Besides, if I don't tease you, how else are you supposed to get out that bitchiness you keep bottled up inside?"

Eddie rolls his eyes, but he's also grinning. On that much less somber note, they make their way outside, where the others are waiting in the parking lot.

"Everyone ready?" Bill asks when they join the group. "No going back."

"We don't have any weapons," Ben points out.

"Last time we used whatever was around more than anything we brought," Richie says dismissively. "I smashed that motherfucker in the face with a bat I found in his tower of creepy."

"I just kicked It," Eddie threw in, almost cheerfully. "Pretty satisfying."

The sudden image of Eddie's furious shrieking as he kicked It in the face makes Richie laugh. "There will never be anything funnier than your tiny self screaming in Its face like a war cry," Richie snorts.

Eddie digs his elbow into Richie's side as much as he can with their hands connected. "It's really great that you get joy out of my pain," he says dryly.

"It's not your pain. It was your irritation, if anything. Besides, we just talked about this."

"That we have," Eddie sighs, and looks at Bill. "We're probably as ready as we'll ever be."

At that, Bev ducks her head, but when Ben takes her hand comforting, she manages a brittle smile. They all feel kind of brittle, more and more so as they began the trek across town to the old pumping station.

Ben leads them to an old manhole, but their movements slow down when they see it's already opened.

"Who the hell would come out *here*?" Richie asks incredulously.

"I doubt it's a friend," Bev comments darkly. Richie agrees.

"A maintenance worker, maybe?" Eddie tries, but his voice makes it clear he doesn't really believe it.

"No one would use these old pumps," Ben disagrees grimly. "Luckily our old friend Bowers is already dead. No surprise visits from him this time around." He sighs. "Might as well head down."

Bill nods, and as always, leads the way.

When they're all down - Eddie last, so Richie can go underneath and brace him because of his bad arm - they all go for their phone flashlights.

"Still nasty down here," Richie says with a grimace. "0 stars. My Yelp review is *not* going to be complimentary."

"Richie," Ben groans.

"Shut the fuck up," Eddie finishes with a sigh. Bev makes a sound of agreement - but Bill isn't paying any attention to their drama. He's stock still, staring at a bag laying upended in a small pool of dirty green water.

"Bill?" Bev says. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't answer. Richie watches with a growing sense of dread as Bill goes forward to pick up the bag. He examines it, and then rifles half-desperate through it.

"Th-th-*this* is A-Audra's," he chokes. His eyes snap to the tunnel ahead, glaring into the darkness. "It shuh-shouldn't b-b-be p-possible, b-but it is. Her ph-phone and k-k-keys are righ-right here." He stands, dropping the back onto the ground. "W-where is she, you b-b-b-bastard?" he howls.

"Bill," Ben says, half warning and half pleading. It doesn't seem to register with him, and a moment later, he takes off into the sewers, just like they all expect him to. Some people never change.

"Jesus fuck," Richie grits out, and tugs Eddie along to follow.

"Does he ever learn?" Eddie asks, despairing. "He's gonna get himself killed!"

Richie privately agrees. "I don't want to hear that defeatist attitude!" he calls over his shoulder instead, because Eddie sounds halfway to a panic-asthma attack already.

High-pitched, Eddie wheezes a laugh. "*We're screwed!*" Good boy.

"That's more like it!"

"Can we please stop quoting Heath Ledger movies," Ben says, voice tight. Bev laughs shortly. Funny, Richie thinks. He doesn't remember laughing so much the first time they were down here. He hadn't been able to joke then at all. Part of him hopes that'll be what saves him.

"I'd join in if I'd seen 10 Things I Hate About You more than once in the last decade," Bev teases, but behind the bright front there's real tension in her voice. Of all of them, she has perhaps the most reason to be afraid. Last time she was down here in these old tunnels, she'd spent too much time alone. Alone, and in the deadlights.

They follow Bill as fast as they can in the murky, water-filled sewers - and before Richie's even ready to, they spill into the large cistern, with its tower of children's toys and halo of corpses.

Audra is there, floating much like Beverly had so many years before, but much higher in the air. They won't be able to reach her, not without some effort. Bill yells her name, half-hysterical, but the rest of them don't bother. She's out of the danger zone, at least for now.

"That's my husband," Bev says, stunned, and Richie thinks she's talking about Audra in confusion until he sees the body propped up against the Tower. "How the hell -?"

"He's probably the one who got Audra down here," Richie says,

grimacing. "It was using Henry Bowers to get to us earlier - why not use your husband?"

"I must have said the name of the town at some point and he chased me here." Bev wipes a tear from her eye, but she's glaring at the corpse. "Good fucking riddance," she says, and Ben takes her hand.

"Where are you, you bastard!" Ben bellows. Next to him, Bev clenches her jaw. All fear seems to have bled out of her; all that's left is anger. Richie feels it, too - he's afraid, yes, but underneath that he's just mad. This is the sonofabitch who'd tried to kill them, who'd screwed them all up so thoroughly they'd had to forget everything just to move on. The bastard that killed their classmates and nearly ate Bill right in front of them.

When It does show up, there's no fanfare. One moment they're looking around, conceivably alone, and the next, Pennywise the 15-Foot-Tall Dancing Clown is in their midst. One huge knee knocks Bill to the ground. A hand grabs at Beverly, lifting her clear up to where Audra hangs, dead-eyed and limp. Side-by-side, the resemblance is striking.

"I should just swallow you whole now," It's voice booms, much like it had when Richie saw him in the park.

"Bev!" Ben yells, and his hands tear at the leg of the clown's pants ineffectually.

"Let her go, Ronald McDonald!" Richie snaps. "Coward! You can't fight us at our level?"

Richie loses track of what happens after that. There's a lot of scuffling, but eventually a well-aimed softball from Bill makes the creature cry out. Beverly drops, landing hard with a last minute roll that probably saves her a broken limb or two but definitely jars most of her joints. Richie thinks her ankle might be sprained, judging from the way she's grasping at it.

Furious, the clown scrambles on hands and knees. "I let you live as children!" It roars in Bill's face. "I gave you *looong* years." The words come out grating and half-human. "And it's your own faults you're



here again. Your own faults. You're all going to float!"

He grabs at Bill with one huge hand, who beats at the gloved fist clutching his shirt. It's got one of Bill's arms in Its grasp, too.

Richie doesn't think; he lets go of Eddie's hand and rushes forward. One of the rusty stokes they'd left down here as children is in his path and he grabs it with one hand. A war cry of his own tearing from his throat, he thrusts the damn thing into Its eye right as It goes to take a bite out of Bill. It only works because the clown is smaller than before - perhaps too small to lift them even if It can still hold them in place, which forces It to lean down further to get at them.

It lets out a terrible sound that hurts Richie's ear drums. The other large hand reaches out and fists around Richie's neck.

He can't breathe, and he watches helplessly as Its head comes toward him. He closes his eyes, tuning out every screaming voice except Eddie's. He wants that to be the last thing he hears. He wishes that it could be the last thing he sees, too.

And then, with barely half a foot between Its huge - *bright* - mouth, a hand comes between them from the right. Richie likes to think that even without the inhaler in its fist he'd recognize it, but as it so happens, identification is made easy.

"This is battery acid, fucker!" Eddie screams by his ear, and then his entire forearm is down Its throat, spraying the medicine-not-medicine in fevered pulses of his finger.

It lets go of Richie and sounds like It's dying, but before it retreats entirely, Its sharp teeth close down on Eddie's arm.

Richie knows he'll hear the sound Eddie makes in his dreams for the rest of his life. The creature is no longer a clown, that form dissolving into something spider-like and grotesque, but Richie isn't looking. He can't afford to get distracted right now, and more importantly, neither can Eddie.

It ripped his shirt, and Richie tears it further so that he can tear a strip off. It's not the best, but it's all he has - he ties it around Eddie's

arm as tightly as he can, just above where his arm just *stops*.

“Breathe, baby,” he mutters desperately. He’s trying so hard to keep calm, but there’s so much blood. He suddenly understands Bev’s fear.

This is it, he thinks. The promise he made to bring Eddie home will be kept after Eddie’s already dead, and he’s never going to be happy again.

*He’ll go so sloooooow*, the voice of Pennywise - of Dead Eddie - whispers in his mind.

“You’re gonna be fine, Eds,” he says to both that voice and to Eddie. He hates the fact that his voice comes out a sob.

Eddie wheezes a laugh, but it’s not an asthmatic wheeze. Good thing, too, because he’s pretty sure It swallowed the damn inhaler. “Don’t call me that,” Eddie says weakly. “I hate it when... you...” Eddie tries to get the words out, but he’s so faint that his eyes close instead. He goes limp, but Richie can see his chest move with each breath. He’s alive, but unconscious.

Richie tightens the hand around the makeshift tourniquet. The bleeding seems to be slowing, but he still strips off what’s left of his shirt to try and staunch the flow. HE wants to tighten the tourniquet, paranoid, but he’s scared that if he undoes the knot to redo it, Eddie will lose more blood he can’t afford to.

Beverly stumbles over to their sides. There’s a lot of loud sounds off to the side, around the tower of things - Ben and Bill fighting.

“They need you, Richie,” she gasps, winded and hurting. “I can’t - I hurt my leg when I fell. They need you.”

He looks between her and Eddie, horrified by the very idea.

“I’ll stay with him,” she says quickly, already moving to take Eddie from his arms. “I’ll keep pressure on this, make sure the knot doesn’t loosen. *Go*, Richie.”

Part of him is screaming, but the rest knows she’s right. He leans down, pressing a hard kiss to Eddie’s slack lips, and then he gets to

his feet. His hands are clenched so hard he feels the scabbed, reopened blood oath scar split again.

He stalks around the huge tower of nothing, of childhood junk. He spares a thought to grab a weapon, but he doesn't have to think hard. As if it's fate, a baseball bat is shoved against the tower on the ground in dirty water, and Richie *knows* it's the same bat he'd grabbed to defend Bill when he was a kid. He scoops it up, acknowledging how right it feels in his hand, and approaches where Ben and Bill are trying to get hits in - hits that are blocked by huge, black spider-legs.

He remembers something he'd learned in his twenties, when he'd become determined to get a pet tarantula. "Spiders' bellies are soft," he whispers. *Their soft undersides are vulnerable.* He watches the squabbling with It for half a second before interceding. "*GET IT ON ITS SIDE,*" he yells, louder than he thought he could yell.

They have the element of surprise, because Bill and Ben move without hesitation, almost before he even finishes speaking. They only have a second of the thing on Its side before It starts flailing to right Itself, but that's all he needs.

He says it almost just for the effect. "*Welcome to the Losers' Club, asshole!*"

And with that, he swings the bat into Its soft, glowing underbelly.

He leaves Bill and Ben to "finish" It, but he knows he's done it. He drops the bat, breathing heavily, and the second that glowing light dies, he turns on his heel and splashes his way back to Eddie. He's got Eddie lifted onto his back by the time the bodies start gently coming down, just like they had the first time.

He watches as Bill comes around the tower, his eyes glued on his wife. He's at her side by the time her feet touch the ground, but even Richie can see from feet away that she's still daring dully ahead. When Bill touches her, she slumps like a puppet with its strings cut. Bill barely catches her in time.

"I'll help you carry her out, Big Bill," Ben says quietly, and Bill

silently lets Ben take Audra's other arm. They share the weight, and Richie carries Eddie in the direction the tunnel they came in through.

Right as they're all about to leave, there's a creaking sound louder than they think they've ever heard - and the dome of the cistern begins to tremble.

"It's collapsing!" Beverly warns them as they make their way toward the exit, and all five of them pick up speed. "*Fuck*, hurry!"

They race through the tunnel as quickly as any of them can manage - even Bill shifts Audra onto his own back so that Ben can help support Bev. By the time they reach the manhole they climbed in through, the tunnels themselves are shaking, rubble and debris crashing in as the sewer pipes come apart. Richie can't even imagine the damage up top.

They climb out slowly, trying to make sure neither Eddie nor Audra get banged up more than necessary, and then they all huddle and watch from the distance as entire blocks of Derry residential sink into the earth.

"It's covering everything up. Making sure nobody finds It," Bev chokes with tears running down her face. "This is *awful*." Richie agrees; he hates the town but seeing it crumble like this makes his chest feel hollow.

Instead of watching, he cradles Eddie's body against his and sits down. The bleeding has mostly stopped, and he's still breathing. Richie has high hopes. A few feet away, Bill is begging Audra to respond to him.

"So," Bev says to Ben, but then she just starts sobbing. He takes the initiative and kisses her before pulling her into his arms. She goes willingly and presses against him.

Richie is glad to hear their long awaited I-love-yous, but he's more preoccupied with Eddie's breathing. In and out.

In and out.

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Ben and Bev are already planning to leave town. Bill is still trying to wake Audra up, and Mike is in the hospital with them. Richie visits several times a day, going between Eddie and his friend.

Everything is tied up neatly, he supposes. No one asked too many questions about Bowers, taking their word for it that he attacked them - the police didn't even ask why they didn't report it until after they'd come back, or why they'd left the hotel in the first place. He was already a convicted murderer, after all.

Case closed. It's over.

Eddie looks so small in his hospital bed. Richie's frankly astounded at how quickly they got him one considering all of the hurt people in the collapse, but money opens all doors, he supposes.

He and Eddie have been talking about the others, but after a while, it's only natural that the topic comes around to them.

"You still want me?" Eddie asks him quietly. He looks hesitant about doing so. "Missing arm and all? I'm damaged goods now."

Richie doesn't really get how he can be asking that, considering that Richie has cried over him and is literally sitting next to him with Eddie's hand held tightly in his grip.

"Baby," he says drolly. "You were damaged goods in the first place; we all were. But I am in it to *win it*. You and me are gonna be the sappiest Losers' Club love story there is - forget Benverly out there." Eddie begins to giggle, his expression helplessly fond. Though his cheeks are still pallid, he's starting to look more cheerful. "The second you're out of the hospital you best believe you and me are gonna race those two to tying the knot. They have an advantage because neither of them is in the hospital, but we've got *fate* on our side, so..."

"Awfully confident of you, thinking I'll marry you just like that." He looks smug and deliriously happy in spite of everything, and Richie loves him.

"Oh *please*. Like you haven't been dreaming of marrying me since you

were a wee baby gay,” Richie scoffs, and when Eddie rolls his eyes he stands up to lean in and press kisses all over his face. “Admit it, baby - admit it,” he cajoles in between kisses.

After a minute or two of the assault, Eddie cracks and starts laughing, pushing Richie away with his only remaining hand. Richie sees a lot of jokes about his missing arm in their future. “Okay, okay!” he giggles. “Okay, I’ll marry you; get the fuck off of me.”

Richie sits back down in his seat, satisfied, and takes Eddie’s hand again. Eddie holds on tight.

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When they get out of the hospital, several days later, Richie drags Eddie to the next town over and they do get married. It happens a day before Ben and Beverly, though by that point neither of their childhood friends are a thought in their heads.

The media gets wind of it within a week. Richie isn’t *quite* as famous as Ellen, but he’s well enough known that reporters call night and day, and sometimes show up at coffee shops when Richie’s getting a pick me up. They always ask how it happened. They decline to comment, except for saying that they were childhood sweethearts and are very happy.

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Eddie and Richie have only been married for two months when they realize they don’t remember how they got together. They know that they were together as kids, but they can’t remember many details. They also know that they went back home for a reunion (though why they did is a mystery) and got back together. Eddie remembers a life-threatening terror, both in childhood and during their reunion, but he doesn’t remember why. Richie doesn’t remember that at all.

“I know we’re forgetting for a reason,” Richie says softly one day when Eddie brings it up. They’re lying in bed, ostensibly to go to sleep. Neither of them are tired. “I don’t remember why, but we are.” He privately thinks that the only reason he knows that is because he and Eddie are together. If they had been alone, they wouldn’t

remember Derry all. They would have forgotten the second they'd gone home to their lives. "I don't even really remember what. It's all fuzzy."

"What if we forget each other?" Eddie asks, and he sounds so fragile that Richie's heart breaks. He sounds *terrified*, even worse than he had when he realized he didn't remember quite how he lost his arm. He remembers the collapse of Derry, and has the sick feeling that he was involved, but though he knows losing the arm was part of that mess, he doesn't remember the event itself.

There's something really terrifying about being changed so wholly without recalling the how - even in his heart. Eddie had literally up and moved his *business* to LA to be with Richie without question, and wasn't that so very romcom? Eddie's whole adult life is changed because of a childhood love and events he's slowly forgetting, and considering that, Richie doesn't blame him for being scared to forget one another. He's also... strangely not worried about it.

"We won't," Richie says with certainty. "We can't. You're everything to me, babe - if I forget you I might as well forget myself."

But Eddie isn't convinced, and Richie gets out of bed. He roots around in the drawer of his nightstand, and then he pulls out two pens. Without speaking, he takes Eddie's remaining wrist and, right where it would be hidden by Eddie's wristwatch, writes the word *lover* in all capitals. The V in the middle is red.

"Like my cast," Eddie says, and Richie nods. He doesn't remember much from their childhood, but he remembers that. Loser to lover. Then he draws it on his own wrist, where it's easily visible and yet easily hidden with watches and bracelets. Just for them.

"You know," Richie begins quietly, when it's written on both of them in his scratchy penmanship. He runs a hand through his messy curls, only slightly nervous about how Eddie will respond to his suggestion. "Tattoos are pretty safe to get nowadays." He manages a smile. "No dirty needles for you, Eddie Spaghetti."

Eddie doesn't take the bait. He looks down at the writing on his wrist for a long time, and then he raises his hand to roughly wipe away the

tears in his eyes. He teeters a little, still getting used to the balance issue without his left arm. “I’ll start researching tattoo shops tomorrow.”

After that, they fall asleep easily.